This electronic thesis or dissertation has been downloaded from the King's Research Portal at https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/

Displacement, Permeable Boundaries and Cultural Frontiers in Comics
A Case Study on Mexican Cultural Icons

Mejan, Gabriela

Awarding institution:
King's College London

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

END USER LICENCE AGREEMENT

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

You are free to:
- Share: to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:
- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Non Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works - You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 06. Nov. 2017

Title: Displacement, Permeable Boundaries and Cultural Frontiers in Comics: A Case Study on Mexican Cultural Icons

Author: Mejan Gabriela

Displacement, Permeable Boundaries and Cultural Frontiers in Comics: A Case Study on Mexican Cultural Icons

Gabriela Mejan

PhD

Abstract

The general objective of this research is to propose a critical approach to ambiguous or unstable concepts of national and cultural identity. The particular objective is to study the ways in which these concepts are visually articulated in comics. The research focuses on a number of comic books created in the first decade of the 21st century and published between 2000-2011. All of them draw on what I define as "Mexican cultural icons."

In my analysis I deconstruct the dynamism —a multidirectional interaction— that can be found in these comic books. I argue that comics' icons that represent concepts of national and cultural identity commonly go through a process that I refer to as "iconic displacement", that is to say a removal from the position they are usually presented and, in some cases, a replacement by another icon that seems to fulfil the same communicative goal.

When an icon of national or cultural identity is combined with a foreigner's point of view, the dividing lines between the two domains turn into what I call "permeable boundaries"; these are porous limits that can be partially trespassed creating indeterminate zones that I refer to as "cultural frontiers."

Cultural frontiers could be as diverse as: reverse situations where time and space are altered, characters swapping roles, objects taken out of their original context or the use of code-switching. My specific study focuses on cases of iconic displacement as they are employed in comics that deal with "Mexican cultural icons" represented by non-Mexican contemporary authors. My aim is to demonstrate the many ways in which this visual literacy contributes to give shape and to configure the iconic language of the unstable world of leaky realities that we live in.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 3:

CONCLUSIONS:

Acknowledgements

My utmost gratitude to Dr. Luis Rebaza-Soraluz for his guidance, patience and valuable help.

Special thanks to Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) of Mexico for supporting me.

This thesis is dedicated to my teammates, Luis, Marilú, Marco, Denise, Claudio, Albert and Jenica. Thanks for giving me the strength to run the 42.195 kilometres of this marathon. And to Patricio and Antonella for reminding me of doing it with a smile.

INTRODUCTION:
VISUAL MEXICANITY

This introduction establishes the criteria of selection for the thesis' corpus — a number, among a wide variety, of non-Mexican authors that have produced comics related to Mexico — and points out the key objectives of the present research. The main conceptual and terminological frame as well as the method of analysis are also described in the following pages.

Corpus of Study

The thesis focuses on a number of comic books created in the first decade of the 21st century and published between 2000-2011 in Spain, the United States, France and Mexico. The comic books that constitute the main corpus of my study are Jessica Abel's *La Perdida* (2000-2005), Javier De Isusi's *La pipa de Marcos* [*Marco's Pipe*](2004), Peter Kuper's *Diario de Oaxaca* [*Oaxaca Diary*] (2008), Jessica Abel, Gabriel Soria and Warren Pleece's *Life Sucks* (2008) and Edmond Baudoin and Troubs's *Viva la vida. Los sueños de Ciudad Juárez.* [*Long Live Life.The Dreams of Ciudad Juarez.*] (2011). These works are representative of a visible tendency within contemporary comics' authors to produce books based on their experiences while travelling abroad and/or observing multicultural cities.

Main Objectives

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of international comic books authors who have produced works based on their interest on Mexican contemporary life and culture. The formal analysis of their narratives raises questions such as why they have chosen to represent particular icons as cultural identifiers, what do the icons' strategic placement within a page reveals and how do such icons interact with the authors' own cultural background. In this thesis I would like to argue that by answering these questions, a complex mechanism of juxtaposed references with unclear boundaries can be exposed.

The general objective of this research is to propose a critical approach to the analysis of ambiguous or unstable concepts of national and cultural identity. The particular objective is to study the ways in which these concepts are visually articulated in comics.

In order to demonstrate the role that external factors such as marketing campaigns and international trade play in the construction of notions of what is visually accepted as official Mexicanity, in the present introductory section of this thesis I exemplify such cases using pages taken from contemporary comic book authors like Bryan Lee O'Malley or Jessica Abel.

Once these concepts and the main terminology are explained, in **Chapter 1** I intend to demonstrate the importance of de-constructing this influential iconicity that, I argue, is crucial in order to understand the conscious and unconscious representations of Mexicanity used by all of the authors studied in this research.

Another equally crucial aspect of this research is to demonstrate that these authors are part of an international trend within contemporary comic books to portray ordinary characters going on about their everyday life. In this particular case, the authors' shared topic of interest is Mexican life and culture. One of my aims is to reveal the different ways in which these authors are confronted with the need to reinvent themselves when noticing their foreignness in Mexico. I therefore make allusion to cases of other contemporary artists that face similar situations while living and working in Mexico.

In **Chapter 2** I analyze specific problems and situations in each one of these comics. What I intend is to demonstrate the authors' conscious and unconscious use of a process that I refer to as "iconic displacement", that is to say a removal from the position certain icons are usually presented and, in some cases, a replacement by another icon that seems to fulfil the same communicative goal.

Having stated all this, in **Chapter 3** I focus on the context in which the works, authors and artistic movements operate. The aim of this chapter is to show a testimonial of factors that increase the possibilities of iconic displacement within these books including aspects related to the creative process of comics as well as editing and translation issues.

Another equally important objective is to show that even though the frontier between Mexico and the United States is fundamental in order to understand key aspects of some of the comics analyzed here, one of this thesis' aims is to contribute to demonstrate that the multiple cultural frontiers created in these comics are also proof of a broader cultural interchange involving numerous worldviews, international relations and other factors which are always present in any kind of human multicultural interaction. I intend to demonstrate how unclear boundaries between the cultures involved might be and how this visual literacy contributes to give shape and to provide a language to an unstable world of leaky realities. By leaky realities I am making allusion to a recurrent phenomenon often found in these comics. When the boundaries concealing a determined cultural space become porous and permeable two main effects occur. The first one being, the zones these boundaries were supposed to enclose and define are no longer easily identifiable. The second is that, thanks to such permeability, elements of what would have helped to shape an "essential" or intrinsic identity of a determined place or culture are able to filter throughout the entire comic book. So the realities represented in these works manifest a world permeated by a continuous interchange of different cultures, registers, languages and worldviews. Realities are leaking because they are constantly being permeated.

Conceptual and Terminological Frame

In this section it is explained what I mean by "icons", "Mexican cultural icons", "permeable boundaries" and "cultural frontiers". I also explain the use in comics of Mexican cultural icons that can be popular and widely spread or, on the contrary, hardly known internationally.

Cultural Iconic Sequences in Comics

My approach to what I identify as the common denominator between the very different comics studied in the present research is mostly based on Scott McCloud's definition of comics, presented in his book *Understanding Comics*, as, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, 9). With such conception, McCloud not only describes this medium but also elaborates on the term "sequential art", coined a decade before by Will Eisner (1985, 2), who argued that one of the fundamental elements of comics is the succession of pictures that follow a narrative order with the purpose of telling a story. Therefore, the point of the comic book structure is to present an ordered progression of images, or, in other words, to be sequential. By "other images" McCloud refers to letters that have been arranged in sequences in order to form words, seen in this way, letters are "static images." That is to say, letters are part of the imaginary, words are regarded as images or, as Eisner asserts, in comics "text reads as an image" (1985, 10). For the purpose of this research, specific words related to Mexican culture are called and understood as "iconic sequences."

All of the books analyzed in this thesis subscribe in one way or another to McCloud's aforementioned definition of comics since all of them are samples of this particular type of sequential art. However, it should also be taken into account that McCloud's approach is only a point of view found in the rapidly increasing bibliography produced over the past few years to define the medium of comics. It is true, that, as most of his critics assert, his definition is extremely broad:

> The ahistoricism of McCloud's account lead it to count far too many things as comics. But it is also arguably too limiting —for it seems to set inappropriate constraints on what functional intentions creators of comics may have with respect to their product. We should not assume *a priori* that the author or authors of a comic intend either to convey information or to produce an aesthetic response. (Meskin 2007, 370).

Although I agree that there are multiple aspects that could be narrowed down in McCloud's definition in order to, for example, recognize a clearer chronological evolution of comics, I think this is not too different from what could happen when trying to define in a very specific and detailed way other mediums such as literary genres like the novel or the short story. As Stephen E. Tabachnick asserts:

> It is rare for a new genre to appear in any art form. With the emergence of the graphic or comic book novel, precisely that phenomenon has been happening (...) Literary pedagogy now finds itself confronted with highly sophisticated visual as well as textual material that has sprung out of the most unexpected of sources—the comics. (Tabachnick 2009, 1).

There are always multiple unclassifiable variations that would be left out of a definition, especially in the case of an ongoing artistic movement, which, as Tabachnick mentions, has turned comics into a rapidly evolving art form over the past decades. So, in spite of the criticisms quoted here and many other existing ones, which are not untrue, I still find McCloud's definition pertinent for the purpose of my study, which is not to define comics as an art form or to review their chronological evolution. My main concern is to understand the multiple cultural juxtapositions involved in the creative process of all the comic books analyzed in this thesis. For instance, the function of juxtaposing images and its contrasting effect, or the logic operating behind each sequence and the absolute consciousness of an implied reader, are fundamental aspects that are exhaustively reviewed in this research.

And, deriving from such definition, there are of course many important precisions to be made. One of them is that books such as *La Perdida, Life Sucks* and *La pipa de Marcos* are fictional works while *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* and *Diario de Oaxaca* are travel journals. The latter is actually called a sketchbook rather than a comic book but, being the work of a cartoonist, *Diario de Oaxaca* makes continuous use of the comics' sequential language and, as it is demonstrated on the section called "Simultaneity: Icons Past and Present", it is a more relevant book for this thesis than others because of both its main topic, a foreigner living in Mexico, and the art form used to recount this experience, a visual narrative.

Iconic Mexicanity

As it has been stated, comics consist primarily of sequences of images. According to McCloud each one of these images is an "icon" defined as "any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea" (1994, 27). So, following his approach, every page of every comic book is filled with ordered icons that interact with each other creating a particular dynamism, conveying a particular meaning. Most importantly, the meaning is constructed by the use of representations of something or someone.

Some icons could represent abstract entities such as nationality, religion, ideology, gender or even direction. In his icon chart, shown below, McCloud gives examples of this type of representation:

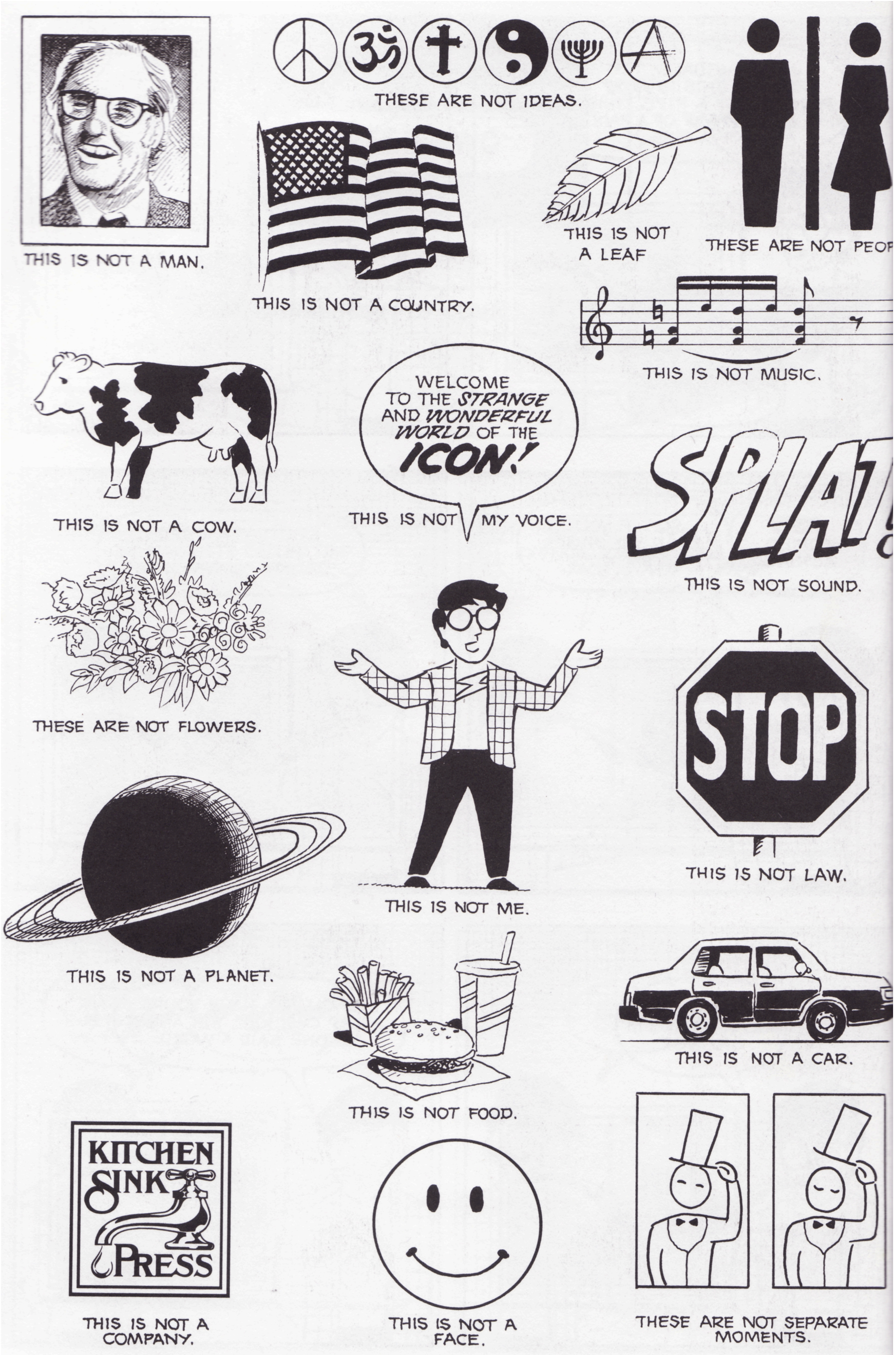


Figure 1. McCloud, Scott (1994) *Understandig Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 26).

By paraphrasing René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* and its famous caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" [This is not a pipe], McCloud takes up a basic principle of representation. The drawing of a cow is perceived as the actual animal; the drawing of a pentagram or the text in a speech balloon are not read or seen, they are “heard” as music or voices, respectively. In this sense, a specific flag not only represents the United States nationality; the menorah and the cross not only represent religion. The “A” not only stands for anarchism and the bathroom signs not only represent gender, both are also pointing the reader to very specific directions, the first one is ideological, the second one is practical.

The meaning assigned to a specific icon depends on the collective imaginary, the cultural code shared by a certain population and the context where it belongs. Therefore, in order to respond to the message conveyed by the icon, or to follow the dynamism of a sequence, a certain level of knowledge or competence is demanded from the reader. So, if the reader counts on this previous knowledge, he/she will be able to distinguish if an icon is outside its habitual boundaries and will therefore be perceived under a different perspective as it “alters” the pre-established order. Nevertheless, as it will be explained on the section called “Picture-in-picture,” even in those cases where the reader is not completely aware, he/she will subconsciously grasp that this is a somewhat entropic representation.

A reader, for instance, might be able to recognize certain icons of nationality different than flags and associate truncated pyramids, piñatas, Day of the Dead skulls, revolutionary sombreros or iconic sequences like words and expressions such as “mamacita” or “ay, ay, ay” as representing Mexican nationality. For the purpose of this thesis, representations of this sort within the realm of comics are called “cultural Mexican icons;” that is to say an image used to represent a person, place, thing, word or concept that has its origin in a cultural idea of Mexico.

The five contemporary comics produced by non-Mexican authors that are the main corpus of my study allude to Mexico in the iconic way described and defined by McCloud. So every time an icon alluding to Mexicanity is introduced, it implies a complex world of crossed references that the reader consciously and/or subconsciously absorbs.

Having explained McCloud’s approach I will illustrate how this is applied to the dynamism of a comic book page using the method of analysis I have explained and proposed on the introductory section of this thesis where I analyze the art of *La Perdida*’s book cover.

As I have mentioned before, the grid of a comic book page, like the one found in the example below, taken from Kuper's *Diario de Oaxaca* is a frame of reference whereas every panel within the grid is a compound of juxtaposed elements or icons and many of those are icons of national and cultural identity. In addition, some other icons are also present in order to address politics and a multiplicity of social issues like migration, economic disparities, repression, otherness and so on.

In this page, Peter Kuper depicts himself walking around the streets of Oaxaca in what is represented as one of his last days of his two-year stay in this city:

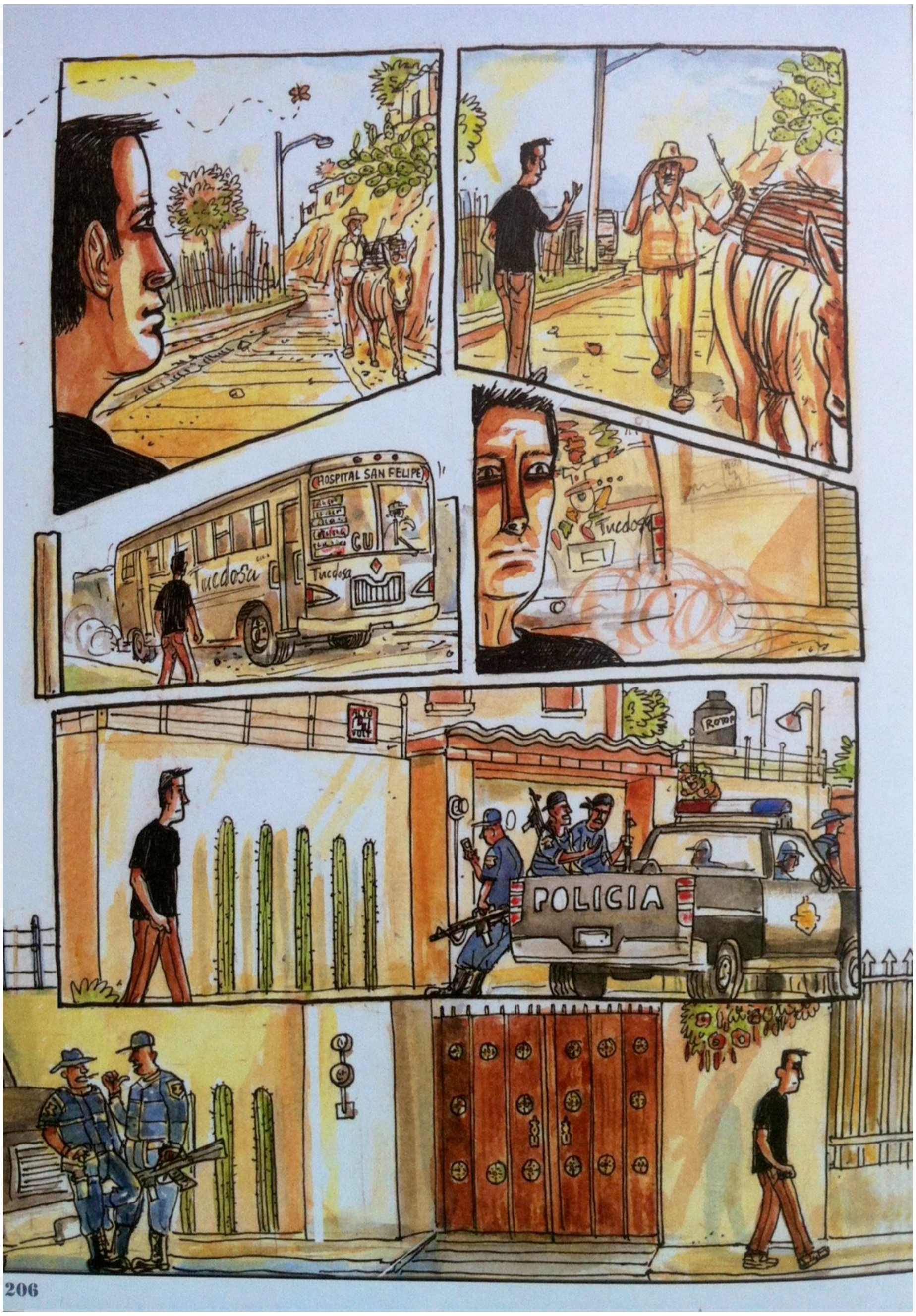


Figure 2. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 206).

I will start by identifying the Mexican cultural icons found in this page. Some of them like the prickly pear plants are very obvious but most of them are not so. There is a butterfly (panel 1) that appears to have flown from the previous page, as the dotted line crossing the panel's frame indicates, where it was depicted in detail as a Monarch butterfly, which is arguably, the best well-known insect of its type in North America. Every autumn and winter these insects migrate from Canada to Mexico and return to the north during the spring and summer seasons. So it is fairly common to find a specimen flying around in the region of Oaxaca during June. In addition, this butterfly was used as an icon for the Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC)'s logo; this institution was created in connection to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed by Canada, the United States and Mexico.

Figure 3. Commission for Environmental Cooperation of North America (2012) "Logo" (Accessed on 12 July 2012. www.cec.org).

There is also the figure of what could be a wood seller wearing a countryside hat (panel 2) with a donkey carrying logs and a prickly pear plant on top of them. Also worthy of notice is the city bus in operation indicating its final destination on the left side window "Hospital San Felipe", as well as its many stops (panel 3). The company's logo (panel 4) and name is written all over the bus "Tucdosa" which stands for Transportes Urbanos de la Ciudad de Oaxaca S.A. [Oaxaca City Urban Transports Ltd.]

In addition, there is a series of local references (panel 4) starting by the water tank on the top right bearing a well known company's name: "Rotoplas", followed by the electrified fence with a small sign that reads "Alto voltaje" [High voltage], the cactus plants and the police vehicle with six policemen surrounding it. And, last, (panel 6) a carefully detailed colonial door garage made of wood and artisanal iron fittings separates the man in the black t-shirt, walking away with hunched shoulders and frowning, from two policemen that are rather relaxed, just like their colleagues in the above panel, standing casually, laughing and off-guard.

In order to pinpoint the iconic displacement in this page it is a must to look carefully at all of the characters' attire. Peter Kuper often uses the resort of depicting himself wearing a black t-shirt to represent his identity as New Yorker. The following example taken from his book *Drawn To New York* (2012) clearly illustrate such case:

Figure 4. Kuper, Peter (2012) "Drawn to New York." (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

The black outfit is not only an icon of New York citizenship but also a cultural indicator of foreignness and social alienation. In this panel the author emphasizes his distancing from the cowboy by depicting himself considerably smaller than him and visibly intimidated; this is verifiable in gestures such as the hands, the frowning gaze and the lines on top of his head. The allusions to the duelling guitar and banjo of a much celebrated film soundtrack or to a country singer also work as cultural markers. In addition, in this case, icons such as the boot and jeans, the gun, the vest, the checked shirt and the leather vest and hat work as Texan cultural icons. So are the words or iconic sequences within the speech balloons communicating intolerance and making allusion to racial tension often found in southern United States.

In a very similar way, in *Diario de Oaxaca*, the black t-shirt indicates

Kuper's self-depiction as a foreign observer who relates himself amicably to the iconic representation of a peasant introduced by the man wearing a "sombrero" and distances himself from the iconic representation of authority, embodied by policeman all uniformed in blue and armed with excessively large guns but depicted as if they were enjoying some leisure time rather than being on duty.

The displaced icon is, in both cases, the New Yorker. In one of the final pages of *Diario de Oaxaca*, Kuper enlists a number of rules that he aims to follow diligently in order to make his transition to New York smoother, among which there is naturally one involving an outfit: "Lose that ethnic shirt that was perfect in Oaxaca; it will look like a clown suit back in New York City" (Kuper 2008, 194). In addition a second element of displacement is also being represented by these overbearing characters that he keeps on finding and inspire his work —the policemen, the cowboy and the bar tender who deliberately abuse and "trespass" their social roles.

This wordless page from *Diario de Oaxaca* is a self-sufficient political comment. I argue that there is no need to read the whole book in order to understand the criticism taking place here and achieved thanks to the strictest use of local icons, which provide enough information. A series of permeable boundaries come into play when juxtaposing all of these icons. The prickly plant that grows in nature contrasts with the stylish cactus used for decoration. The wood seller transports himself walking, he uses a donkey to carry the logs and a stick to lead the animal, he salutes the character in the black t-shirt; while, in contrast, policemen are all armed, they have a large pick-up van, they are not bothered by the presence of the passer by, they carry on looking at their mobile, laughing, smoking and chatting, their only duty being to guard the already highly secured residence of a wealthy person, who is presumably, a government official. Hence, a rich person needs the aid of up to six policemen and an electrified fence in order to be protected from the perils of the streets, that is to say peasants, pedestrians, workers and civilians travelling in urban buses.

In spite the fact that similar situations of social disparity and abuse of power could be found almost anywhere in the world, the local brands, the signs in Spanish, the architecture and the natural elements in Kuper's page clearly state that this is not only taking place in Mexico but in the city of Oaxaca where all of these contrasts are to be found every day.

Therefore, the cultural frontier is in this case structured on the basis of a harsh political criticism. Kuper's book is a work of contrasts with a high-sense of appreciation of both the cultural heritage and the social problems that he is constantly witnessing. It is, in one word, a constant reflection on simultaneity as it is discussed in the section called "Simultaneity: Icons Past and Present." In a personal interview I asked the author whether his intention was always to consciously produce political criticism or if this is something that he keeps on finding in his work spontaneously:

> I do not want to be hard but they force me to be hard; all these bad ideas that are always being dumped on us by politicians. I would love to live in a world where I could spend more time painting flowers; but, unfortunately, the flowers were killed by greedy people and so I end up looking at the bare tree. That's not as pretty but that's what is being presented, so I draw what I see. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

As the author mentions, the key aspect of this page is to understand that he is in fact drawing what his subjective condition of New Yorker enables him to see. He perceives and therefore represents Oaxaca —or a bar somewhere in Southern United States— with a profound sense of otherness. As William Nericcio asserts: "There's perception and then there's reality. So I like to think of these signs as rentable skins" (Nericcio 2011, n.p.). Kuper is deliberately choosing to perceive such realities with his New Yorker skin and to assign other "rentable skins" to the characters involved in the examples quoted in this section. As for the so-called flowers that the author would love to be able to draw more often, there are also numerous examples such as the butterfly, the friendly local man and similar appealing icons that have been represented in the previous pages where Kuper narrates his last walk around the city.

In examples such as this one is where I find the intersection between politics and my research. Although my thesis is on the field of cultural studies, and, like Ien Ang asserts on his essay "From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research: Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-first

Century" (2006), this discipline has been criticized for being an intellectual practice disengaged from politics but there is always an intrinsically political discourse to be found in all of these comic books. And this is very much in line to what Ang asserts:

> Such insights seem to suggest that cultural studies academics should stop having political pretensions and concentrate instead on what they are paid for: the scholarly production of knowledge (about culture). However, such a disentanglement of knowledge and politics flies in the face of the Foucauldian truth—one of the few certainties cultural studies people hold dear—that knowledge is always ultimately "political" (185).

Therefore, the "political" aspect obtained by the analysis of these comic books is not an accessory but an essential component of my study and research focus.

In addition, the example of this page from *Diario de Oaxaca* contributes to illustrate that it is not always necessary to use popular icons in order to create a cultural frontier. Iconic Mexicanity is also represented by the use of Mexican cultural icons that are not necessarily well known, as it is, for example, the case of the "Rotoplas" water tank. A curious fact of how this urban icon has permeated into Mexican colloquial speech is that, in certain areas of the country, people use the term "Rotoplas" as a derogatory name to refer to a corpulent person. Thus, widely spread cultural icons and unkwon icons are equally relevant when analyzing the dynamism of a comic book page. There is always a visible difference of iconic references between authors like Kuper or Abel who demonstrate a careful observation of the place they are visiting and those like Peggy Adam, mentioned on the section entitled "Iconic Replacement," who produced a comic book inspired in Ciudad Juarez without never having travelled to Mexico. The problem with this and other authors interested in Mexican culture is not only that they have never been to Mexico but also that they are not able to fully understand the reality they pretend to address. As Paul Gravett mentions:

> You do not always have to write or draw what you know. There are many graphic novels about growing up that are not derived from the author's life but become authentic and affecting through a mix of observation, research and storytelling skills. Daniel Clowes and Nabiel

> Kanan somehow innately understand the limbo that their teen heroines are going through. (Gravett 2005, 23).

In the following pages I will elaborate on the depths of understanding that the authors studied in this thesis might have of Mexican culture and, in the case of fictional works like *La Perdida*, *La pipa de Marcos* and *Life Sucks*, the many "limbos" their characters might go through.

Mexican Cultural Icons

All of the books analysed in this research share an interest in portraying Mexican culture within Mexico or, in the case of *Life Sucks*, a trace of Mexico within the urban space of Los Angeles, as well as presenting their point of view on the different socio-political conflicts encountered in Mexico. All of them draw on what I define as "Mexican cultural icons".

In my approach to these issues I take into account the instability of the concept of "national culture", which, as Carlos Monsiváis asserts in his essay "Notas sobre el Estado, la cultura nacional y las culturas populares en México" [Notes on the State, National Culture and Popular Cultures in Mexico] (1989), is always greatly influenced by politics: "En la práctica, cultura nacional suele ser la abstracción que cada gobierno utiliza a conveniencia, y conduce lo mismo a un nacionalismo a ultranza que al mero registro de un proceso" (33). [In practice, national culture is often the abstraction that each government uses at its own convenience, and it leads to an extreme nationalism or to nothing more than the registration of a process].

In addition, in his book *Identity and Modernity in Latin America* (2000) Jorge Larrain asserts that the history of Latin American culture has often been analyzed and conceptualized in what could be regarded as a cycle in which two main types of theories operate. The first one has got its emphasis on the evolution of "modernisation" -as regarded in terms of History of Culture in the Western world. On the other hand, there are a number of theories focusing in "essential" and autochthonous aspects of Latin American identity that give shape to very specific notions of culture and society. Larrain however considers that modernity and identity shouldn't be regarded as opposites, he asserts that the evolution of modernity is necessarily linked to the parallel process of construction of identity that has brought as a result “a mixture, a hybrid, a product of a process of mediation which has its own trajectory; it is neither purely endogenous nor entirely imposed from without” (p. 6).

I argue that all of the comic books analyzed in this research present in various ways a dialogue with this hybrid notion of national identity and modernity. All of the authors are in search of both, an “essential” sense of Mexican identity and they also analyze the country’s socio-economic and cultural development making allusion to concepts of modernity dating from their own Western background. In other words, this “mixture” described by Larrain and applicable to Mexico as a Latin American nation is verifiable in how the country and the culture are rendered by the artists in all of the comics analyzed in this study.

Equally relevant is the fact that in his essay “Archival Fictions: García Márquez’s Bolívar File” Roberto González Echevarría points outs that even in our present day the Colonial period could still be regarded as *the* beginning of an unfinished process of constructing Latin American national identities: “a beginning that has not ceased being a beginning because the issues that it opened are still current in Latin America” (184) Hence his definition of Latin America as an unfinished project of modernity. I have also found that all of the authors I work with in the present study make multiple references to this sense of Mexico as an “unfinished” modern nation, as a developing country that manifests a process of building up through its politics, history, literature and popular culture.

Finally, both Larrain and González Echevarría emphasize the importance of Latin American novelists as public intellectuals. Latin American historical fiction throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries has explored exhaustively the notion of identity and numerous authors have demonstrated in many ways this sense of fragmentation, of an uncompleted process. González Echevarría exemplifies this issue describing the effect of *El general en su laberinto* (1989) - the novel by Gabriel García Márquez which gives a fictionalized account of Simón Bolívar’s last days- as follows:

> The shattering of Bolívar's vision is significant at an immediate level as a commentary on today's dramatic political situation in Latin America. Bolívar even appears as a prophet whose admonitions have not been heeded, when he states that going into debt will lead the continent to ruin. But the shattering of that dream of unity also refers to the narrative itself, because, together with the physical ruin of the Liberator, the fragmentation of Gran Colombia carries, too, the fragmentation of any narrative project that purports to offer a global vision of Latin American culture and history. (204)

As I have stated before, all of the comics analyzed in this research are the work of non Latin American authors. However all of them establish a direct dialogue this hybrid and unfinished sense of national identity nailed by González Echevarría and Larrain. Therefore, I argue that this ongoing process of defining identity and building up the modern nation, pointed out by both theorists and reinforced by Latin American writers is clearly reflected but, moreover, problematised by the foreign perspective of contemporary graphic narratives attempting to render Mexican culture.

I will now proceed to illustrate a summary of the key elements taken into account in my analysis. The following illustration is taken from the original art created for *La Perdida*'s book cover:

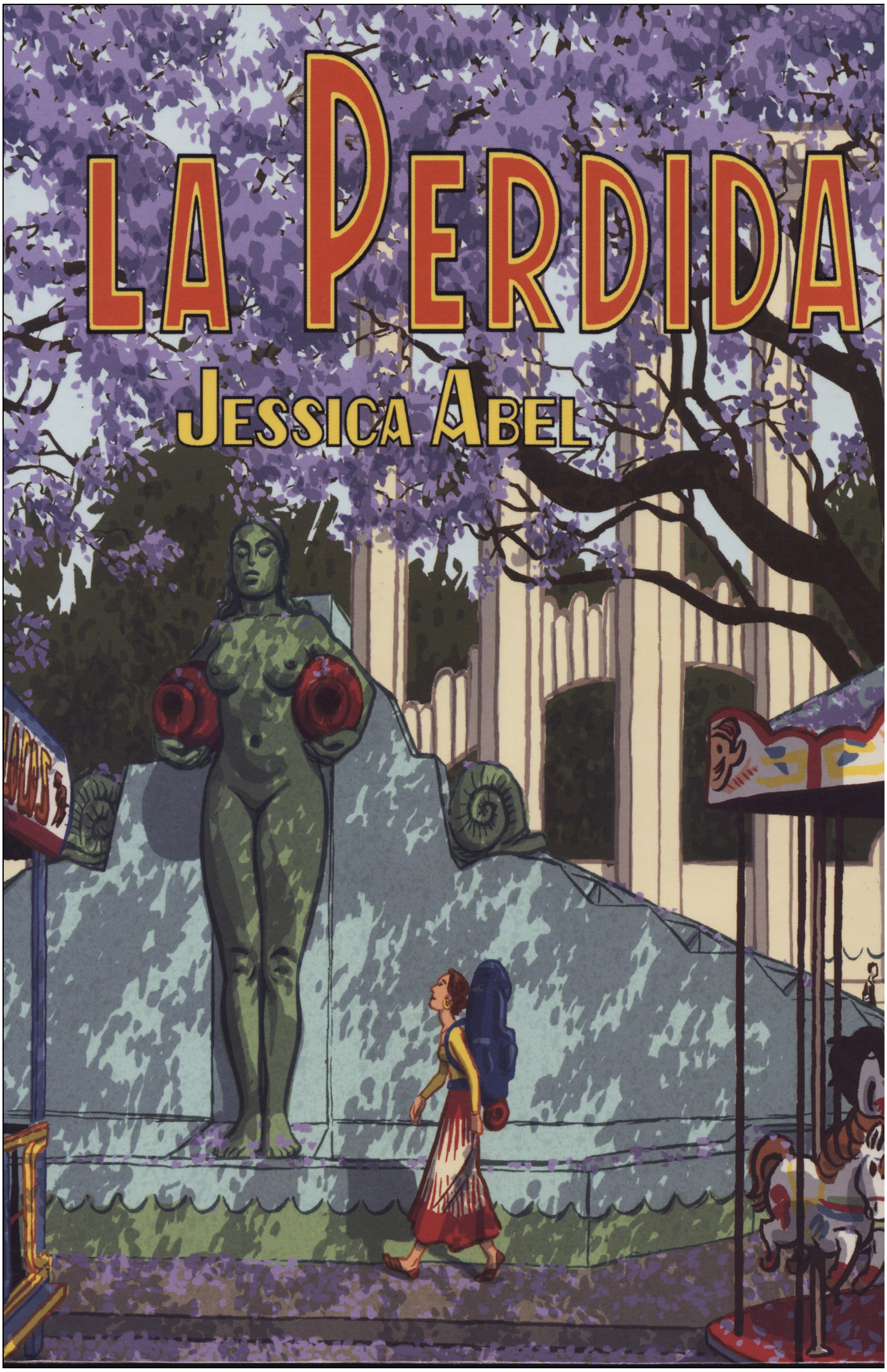


Figure 5. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, n.p.).

As it has been stated previously, it should be taken into account that every page of every comic book is filled with icons that interact with each other creating a particular dynamism, conveying a particular meaning. In **Figure 5** there are a number of obvious and not so obvious references to Mexicanity:

a) The merry-go-round to the right and the bumper cars to the left with the sign “autos locos” [“crazy cars”] illustrate a very distinctive landmark of Mexico City which is the presence of small street funfairs found all year around in parks and squares.
b) A woman dressed up like one of the most celebrated 20th century Mexican artists, the painter Frida Kahlo.
c) Jacarandas are one of the most common trees found in the capital.
d) The scene is set in a park called Parque México in the Hipódromo Condesa neighbourhood. The columns at the back represent a specific open-air theatre preceded by a monumental fountain.

Iconic Displacement

The next step is to focus on a process that icons which usually represent concepts of national and cultural identity commonly go through; I refer to this as “iconic displacement”, that is to say a removal from the position they are usually associated with and, in some cases, a replacement with another icon that seems to fulfil the same communicative goal.

a) Mechanical games and rides imported from the United States proliferated everywhere in the city and became one of the most popular family activities during the 20th century and still remain so.

b) A light brown haired woman dressed like Frida Kahlo carrying a back-pack and a sleeping bag makes allusion to numerous foreigners who are big admirers of the artist and adopt her style and re-import it into Mexico where hardly any young woman living in the city would be found dressed in the same fashion or would appear carrying camping gear in an urban park. This is a clear example of a young character going through a “limbo” as was mentioned in the previous section.

c) A native tree from South America, jacaranda, was successfully introduced in Mexico where it can be spotted blossoming under the sun even during winter. The figured date of this scene is February 23rd, that is one month before the spring equinox so, for a character coming from Chicago, where there is likely to be snowing during that time of the year, finding sunny weather and blossoming trees —there are petals in the pavement and in the floor of the merry-go-round— this is a major and celebratory surprise.

d) In 1926 the Architect Leonardo Noriega and the Engineer Javier Stávoli designed the Art Deco inspired Open Air Theatre Lindbergh comprising of five monumental pillars topped with a canopy and surrounded by a pergola and the fountain of a nude woman with pitchers. In recent years, the neighbourhood Hipódromo Condesa has become a popular destination for artists, creators and foreigners living in the city. It is therefore not casual that this character has an acquaintance from home living in an old apartment building in this area.

Permeable Boundaries

A further clarification to be made relates to the combination of an icon of national or cultural identity and the presentation of a foreigner's perspective; in this case, the dividing lines conventionally placed between the two horizons turn into what I call "permeable boundaries." These are porous limits that can be partially trespassed. As Patricia M. Goff asserts:

> [Borders] are disappearing but still discernible, and the degree to which this is more or less true varies across issue areas. I argue that it might be fruitful to reframe the debate by inquiring not whether borders continue to be meaningful, but in what way they are made meaningful. This line of inquiry leads us to observe that states are responding to the increasing permeability of borders, even though they are complicit in bringing it about. (2000, 534).

Therefore, in the example presented here, what would at first glance be perceived as a representation of a quintessentially Mexico City scene in one of the most traditional neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area has all sorts of external factors intervening in it. The foreigner is dressed like someone who evokes a Mexico made of equally foreign influenced elements, from vegetation, to architecture to leisure activities.

In addition to that, this is not a supposedly objective view of Mexico City; this is Mexico with a foreigner's presence and through a foreigner's sense of wonder. The character's aim is to blend in, to become Mexican herself. And she is trying so hard that she in fact obstructs her own attempt —this issue will be thoroughly analyzed on the section called "Illegal United States Citizen in Mexico." She looks so much like she is trying to be Mexican and this is precisely the author's intention: "Carla acts dumb, and I love characters who are blind in one way or another. I never write characters who have it all together —why bother?" (Abel 2007, n.p.).

In fact, I would argue that Jessica Abel's greatest achievement is to create a representation of Mexico as seen from a United States' citizen who consciously tries to resist —as much as she is culturally able to— the temptation to fall into well spread clichés of how Mexico should look and feel. As William Nericcio asserts in *Text{t}-Mex*: "Curiously enough, it is with the artistic vision of Americans of Mexican descent that one witnesses the coming together of legacies and conventions of representation that most often stay firmly anchored within their own isolated estuaries." (2008, 197).

Cultural Frontier

What has been created in this page is an indeterminate zone that I refer to as "cultural frontier." The specific result here is an example of the multi-faceted, and not always explored enough, aspects of Mexico and the United States vicinity that goes far beyond the well-known categorization of Chicano [of Mexican ancestry within the United States] literature. There is a multiplicity of levels and zones of exchange:

> The borders dividing and defining Mexico and the United States, as well as those no-less-real borders dividing High Culture and Popular Culture, cannot stop the surging of ink, the dance and coupling of photons as they bounce off canvases and comic-book pages into the willing and wilful eyes of their readers and viewers. (Nericcio 2008, 205).

There are many Mexicos, many United States and, for that matter, many worlds within the world so the multiple interactions of these plural realities lead to endless possibilities, endless zones of convergence and endless cultural frontiers. Those present in the comics analyzed in this research will be extensively reviewed in the following sections.

Foreigners in Mexico, Foreignness in Comics

I find it relevant to explain why, among the wide variety of artists that have produced comic books about Mexico, I have selected a very reduced number of works, writers and illustrators for my case study. It should be underlined that this research is not conceived as a comprehensive guide to contemporary comics related to Mexico. As I have mentioned before, the books that conform my main object of study are representative of a somewhat recurrent topic in the creative scene of comics. They have been selected because of their narrative cohesion and the fact that all of the authors have travelled to Mexico at the turn of or in the first years of the 21st century. All of them have therefore introduced in the creative process of a comic book the knowledge obtained from their experiences during their stay in the country.

At the turn of the century, Javier De Isusi spent a few months working as an international observer in the community of La Realidad, in Chiapas, while Jessica Abel moved for two years to Mexico City. She produced her first novel inspired in her experiences there and, when she was back in the United States, she joined Gabe Soria and Warren Pleece to create a comic book where her exploration of the Mexican topic is still palpable. In 2006, Peter Kuper moved to Oaxaca also for a couple years. In 2010, Edmond Baudoin and Jean Marc Troubet “Troub’s” spent almost two months travelling in Mexico but mostly staying in Ciudad Juarez.

In this research I also allude to other works that could be related to these comics. For example, in section called “The “Superchild” in Ciudad Juarez”, I analyse *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* and I mention cases of related fictional comic books such as *Luchadoras* (2007) by Peggy Adam or *Marta and the Missing* (2010) by Maureen Burdock. Likewise, in a number of sections, when discussing issues related to the creative process of *La Perdida* and its multiple references to Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and the artistic Mexican scene of the early 20th century, I talk about relevant works such as *Un verano insolente* (2011) [An Insolent

Summer], a fictional novel by Rubén Pellejero and Denis Lapière inspired in the creative-intellectual world of Mexico City in 1923. I also cite multiple single pages or panels taken from contemporary comics that make occasional use of Mexican cultural icons without turning this issue into one of their central topics; this is, for example, the case of the Canadian series *Scott Pilgrim* (2004-2010), which is addressed on the section titled Scott Pilgrim's "Precious Little Boundaries: A Borderland Matrix".

I also mention several relevant cases of cartoonists, plastic artists, writers and intellectuals that have travelled or, in some cases, moved to Mexico permanently, such as the Belgian contemporary artist Francis Alÿs, who resides in Mexico City since 1986 and whose work is a reflection on Mexican society, his point of view is taken into account when describing the issue of the "local foreigner" in the section called "Telenovelas and Vampires: Identifying the Local Foreigner." With regard to my discussion on foreigners' perspectives, it is very pertinent to contrast Alÿs' creative processes with those of the comics studied here.

In addition to what has been said, this research is not intended to present a chronological history of comics produced by foreigners who talk about Mexico. Nevertheless, I illustrate the main generalities of the context and background of the comics analyzed here. In the section titled "Where in the World of Comics?" I also talk about cases such as the Hernandez Brothers, who have set an important precedent in the comics scene of the 1980's decade; these Mexican-American authors were pioneers on immersing into the world of Mexican culture, magical realism and the subject of Mexicanity within the United States and their contribution can still be traced on several comics produced nowadays regardless if they are related to Mexico or not.

As for the production of comics by Mexican authors I also provide a brief general panorama of the national comic book production throughout the 20th century and in different sections such as the one titled "Mexican Contemporary Comics: ¿Los Perdidos?" I address the issue of the very scarce comic book creation over the past decades within the country. However, it is worth to mention that my main focus is not to provide an extensive comparison between what is produced in Mexico and what foreign authors are publishing abroad.

I was also able to carry out a series of interviews with some of the authors and editors involved in the creation of these comics such as Peter Kuper or Edmond Baudoin as well as other people equally relevant because of their involvement in the editing, promoting and academic research of these books including the comics scholars Dr. William A. Nericcio and Dr. Ernesto Priego and the publisher and scriptwriter, Francisco de la Mora. The full transcripts from those interviews are included in the final chapter of this dissertation. I present their different points of view throughout the research in order to provide not only a wider context of these books' readership and niche but also a broader picture of their current cultural impact. My research is also based on my professional work as a regular contributor for different popular culture blogs and other printed and digital media from Mexico. In the past 10 years I have had the opportunity to work with a number of comic book publishers, literary and cultural newspaper editors and publishers of children's books and magazines. I have also been a sports journalist for a few years. It was thanks to my journalistic experience that I was able to interview a number of relevant authors, editors and scholars that I have met through my work experience. One of my main interests was to produce conversations –rather than strictly formal and methodological interviews– that investigated my scholarly interests but also integrated the vast world of popular culture where all of the interviewees and I interact. This thesis is therefore nurtured by the dynamic work of young's people and popular culture publications where all of the interviewees presented in this dissertation play a major role.

I argue that the same system of analysis I propose in this thesis could also apply for any kind of comic. Due to the fact that comics are constructed by iconic language, it is possible to find cultural frontiers in almost any segment of a comic book. In order to do so, the different boundaries and frames of reference within the story must be identified. Such boundaries could be ideologies, techniques, languages, cultural codes, identities or atmospheres and should be contrasted with those of the reader who decodes the icons according to his/her own references. The reader is sometimes even capable to turn these same icons into standards of real-life mobilizations as it is discussed in the section called "The Icon of a Masked Face." As I have mentioned before, one of my aims is to demonstrate how this visual literacy contributes to give shape and to provide a language to the unstable world of leaky realities that we live in.

Method of Analysis

This section explains the method I employ in order to identify all of the terms and concepts previously described. I also explain how to deconstruct them in the discussion of specific comic book pages, and the reasons why I consider them to be a recurrent object of representation in contemporary comic books.

As I explained in previous pages, for this study I make use of artist and theorist Scott McCloud's concepts of comics' pictorial (images) and sequential icons (words) I also make use of the idea of the comics' "gutter"—*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994) —, archaeologist Bradley J. Parker's multidisciplinary understanding of frontiers and boundaries—"Toward an Understanding of Borderland Processes" (2006)—, as well as the concepts of "osmosis" and "Xicanosmosis" [C3.2] as proposed by William Nericcio in his book *Text{t}-Mex* (2007). Using the abovementioned theoretical framework I deconstruct the dynamism that can be found in these comics with the objective of analyzing the creation of cultural frontiers within contemporary comics.

Considering the extensive existing literature about border cultures one of the main reasons why I have selected Parker because of his interdisciplinary approach that reaches far beyond a purely historical analysis. I am not implying that there are not other equally useful and dynamic contemporary models to analyze the borderland process such as the broadening idea of geography as used by Anssi Paasi whose approach, like Parker's, explores different disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies and political science. In fact, Paasi's analysis of Finnish national identity and the concept of "Finlandization" (53, 1990), which has been altered and reshaped by the country's nationalist movements and a number of historical events such as the World War II or its membership to the European Union, is a clear example of permeability and resonates with what Nericcio describes as the process of Xicanosmosis.

An equally relevant scholar is Doreen Massey who will be mentioned in the analysis of social class immobility found in *Life Sucks* and who has studied specific regions in Latin America and has also explored gender issues exhaustively. In addition, I will also make allusion to David Sibley and Sarah James who dismantle the idea of demographic purity and describe the process of border crossing through porous liminal borders which exist not only in geographic borderlands but also as pre-conditioners of everyday life situations. However, I found that focusing in one model, as the one proposed by Parker who has worked in contribution with a multidisciplinary team was most suitable for this type of analysis for various reasons. The first one being, in Parker's theory, concepts such as the "borderland matrix" and the "continuum of border dynamics" are extremely compatible with the sequential flux of a comic book narrative where dividing lines are in fact far from definite. Another equally important reason is that the instability of the borderland as regarded by Parker is originated by the complex interaction of juxtaposed geographic, economic, cultural and demographic boundaries, which are in constant operation. This opens the path for a multi-dimensional discussion nurtured by various disciplines and, as I have stated before, this is highly compatible with the multidisciplinary aspect of comics as an art form. The type of study derived from this approach is necessarily a hybrid analysis very much in the line of the equally hybrid and unstable concepts previously quoted and coined by other scholars such as Nericcio, Larrain and González Echevarría.

I find that the concept of "Xicanosmosis" is not only relevant for the thesis but also the most appropriate theoretical framework that deals with the process of construction, negotiation and re-appropriation of a Mexican national identity. In one hand Nericcio describes, documents and theorizes on the creation of a very ambiguous notion of Mexican culture and identity reinforced by foreigners across popular media. On the other hand he develops a very practical method to demonstrate the process of imposition and deformation of Mexican national identity that can be found in contemporary visual culture and that has in fact permeated in one way or another all of the works analyzed in this dissertation.

Moreover, in spite the fact that Nericcio focuses on Mexican identity as portrayed in visual culture in the United States, his theory of Xicanosmosis is replicable in almost any ethnic group that has been labelled and defined by popular media in similar caricaturesque ways. Nericcio's multidisciplinary approach addressing different areas such as Cultural, Film and Ethnic Studies or Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies is extremely compatible with the interdisciplinary nature of comics as a form of art. The same thing applies to the hybrid nature of his work -combining scholarly theory with colloquial language originated in popular culture- used to analyze the impact of mass culture icons in everyday life.

In addition Nericcio dedicates an entire chapter of his study to comics; in particular to the works of a Mexican American artist Gilbert Hernandez and his legacy to the creation of a hybrid concept of both Mexican and Latin American identity that has transcended in different media. Furthermore, concepts such as "interstices" resonate with the use of resources like "the gutter" in comics; Nericcio is interested in zones of intermittence, which are an essential component of the comics language. His observations push boundaries in a thematic and theoretical level but also in a pragmatic way by offering a comprehensive re-configuration of contemporary visual culture.

Another equally relevant aspect of Nericcio's work is that his analysis is often inspired in autobiographical experiences and observations as a mixed background individual. Nericcio is a Mexican-Italian-American scholar, born and raised in the borderland of Laredo, Texas and relocated to a very different type of a borderland town within the United States which is San Diego, California where he has developed and taught most of his recent works on Mexican culture as seen, rendered and permeated by foreignness.

I argue that the same system of analysis I propose in this thesis could also apply for any kind of comic book. Due to the fact that comics are constructed by iconic language, it is possible to find cultural frontiers in almost any segment of comics as long as the different boundaries and frames of reference within the story are identified —whether they are ideologies, techniques, languages, cultural codes, identities or atmospheres— and contrasted with those of the reader who decodes the icons according to his/her own references and sometimes turns these same icons into standards of real-life mobilizations as it is explained in the sub-section entitled "The Icon of a Masked Face."

Mexicanity within Multicultural Fictional Worlds

In some cases, authors who are not necessarily interested in addressing Mexican socio-political issues in their narratives do make occasional —and often unconscious— use of cultural icons that imply a complex political context. In the following sections I will explain in detail two of these cases. My aim is to demonstrate that external factors such as the North American Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA) have determined enormously what kind of icons of Mexicanity have been propagated worldwide and consequently have gradually made an appearance on comic books. At the same time, I use these examples in order to demonstrate the conceptual framework of scholars like Bradley Parker and William Nericcio as part of my research method.

Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Boundaries: A Borderland Matrix

In this section I apply Bradley Parker's approach of what he defines as "The Borderland Matrix" to a page of the comic book *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (2009). My aim is to demonstrate the complex interaction that comes into play when several multi-cultural icons are juxtaposed in a fictional narrative. In spite of the fact that this is not a comic book that focuses on any Mexican socio-political conflict, the influence of NAFTA is still noticeable.

I argue that one of the most evident contemporary effects of Canada, United States and Mexico's vicinity and their belonging to the NAFTA that can be found in visual culture is the way in which these circumstances have helped to propagate worldwide icons of Mexicanity as the official merchandise of the country's identity. Hence, culture has indeed been relegated to an ornament role, as an accessory that can bring economic profit.

In order to illustrate how this issue has been incorporated into the sharp eye of comics authors, I quote one of the most renown comics series published in the first decade of the 21st century: *Scott Pilgrim* (2004-2010). Written and illustrated by Bryan Lee O'Malley, a Canadian artist of Korean and Irish ascendancy who lives in Los Angeles. The series consists of six volumes; it started with a comic entitled *Scott Pilgrim Precious Little Life* where Scott, the main character, is presented as a young adult sharing a very small apartment with a gay friend, Wallace Wells, who basically supports him in the city of Toronto, Canada. Scott plays the bass on a band, he needs to find a job and he dates a very young Chinese descendant girl until he meets the newly arrived Ramona Flowers, who comes from the United States. He falls in love with Ramona almost immediately and seem to be loved back but, if he is to gain the right to date her, he must defeat all of her evil former boyfriends —as he has been notified via a series of e-mails that he has not paid much attention to. Each volume consists of the presentation of a different battle settled in a videogamesque world where Scott is able to show off his multiple talents as a skilled fighter.

Scott is also threatened by his own exes, characters such as Envy Adams, who broke his heart when she left him to become the lead singer of a famous New York band and is temporarily back in Toronto, or Knives Chau who seeks revenge from being left by him for Ramona.

The following page has been taken from Volume 5, entitled *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe*. This sequence is presented right after a party in which two evil ex-boyfriends, and twins, Kyle and Ken Katayanagi, had shown up to fight Scott. In my analysis of this page I pin point key terms of comics books language that are used all throughout this thesis.

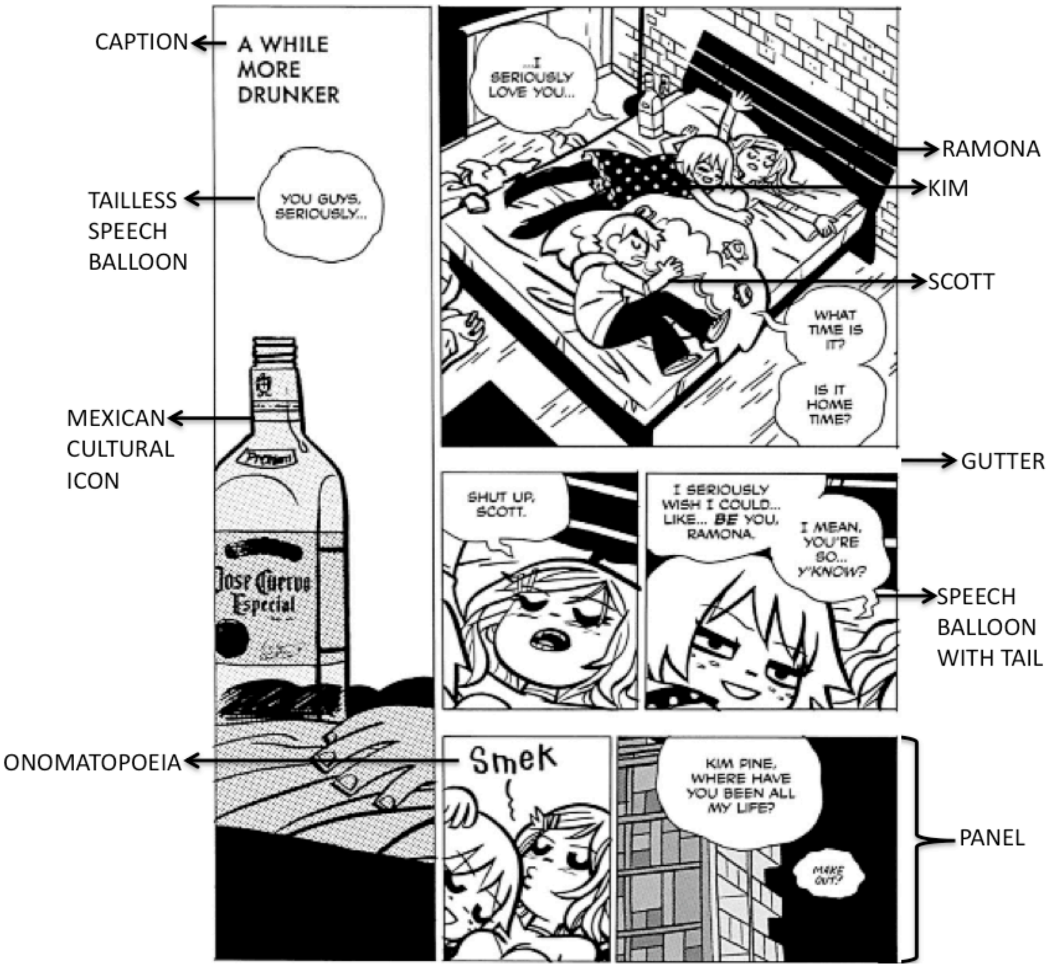
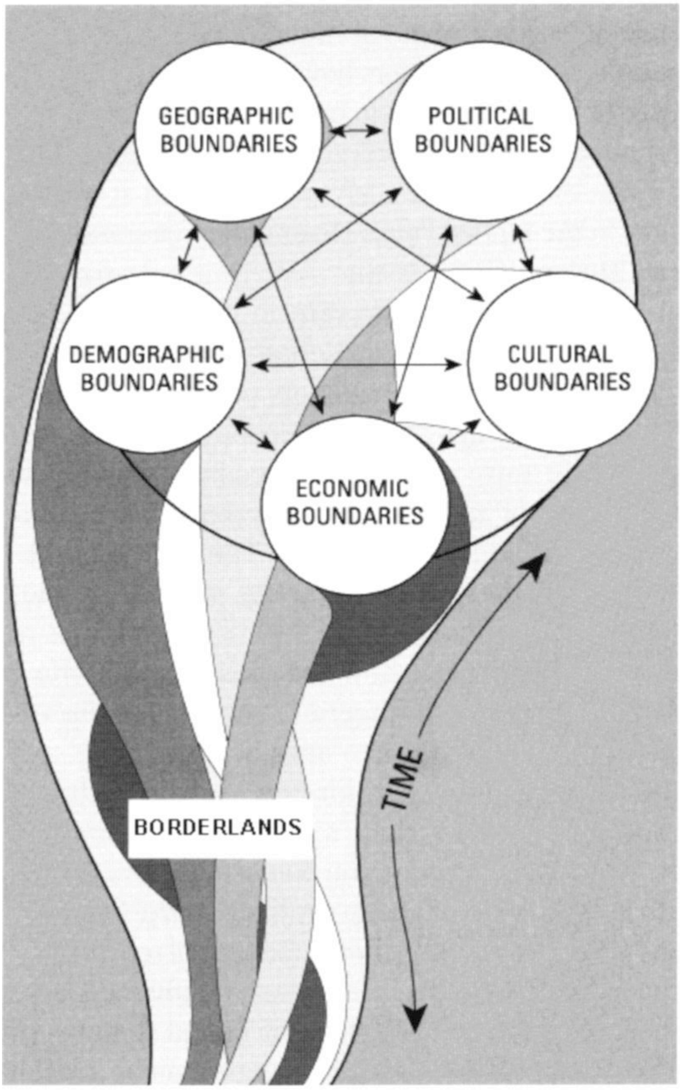


Figure 6. O'Malley, Bryan Lee (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe*. London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 57).

I consider this page to be a clear example of what Parker illustrates as "The Borderland Matrix," that is, a model useful to clearly visualize all of the interactions between the different boundaries interrelated within a borderland as illustrated in the following picture and explained by its quoted caption:



The Borderland Matrix. This figure is a conceptualization of how various types of boundaries (or boundary sets) combine and interact in borderlands. Boundary processes are here envisioned as the dynamic interaction between various types of boundaries both within and between boundary sets through time. The top half of the figure shows the diagram in plan view. The arrows represent the interconnectedness of the boundary sets. As we move through time the relationships between the various types of boundaries represented in the model vary. This interaction —the interaction that takes place within and between boundary sets through time— is the essence of boundary dynamics.

Figure 7. Parker, B (2006) "Toward and Understanding of Borderland Processes". *American Antiquity* (Vol. 71, Issue 1. Society for American Archaeology, 90).

As the Chicano author Gómez-Peña asserts: "Today, if there is a dominant culture, it is border culture. And those who still have notcrossed a border will do it very soon. All Americans (from the vast continent of America) were, are or will be border crossers" (2001, 21). I consider all of the characters in this page to be border crossers. Parker's model is really useful to clearly visualize the different type of boundaries operating within each borderland and beyond, whether they were geographic, political, demographic, cultural or economic. In this comic book page, the equivalent to time would be the sequence and the possibility to move from panel to panel thanks to the gutter.

It is first necessary to distinguish the different categories of boundaries juxtaposed in every comic book sequence in order to identify how and why a borderland has been created thanks to the use of different icons interacting in every sequence.

In the analysis of the comics I refer to in this thesis, all operations that take place imply a number of juxtaposed boundaries embodied by every icon. This dynamic interplay explores the different existent boundaries and how their interaction creates borderlands or areas of convergence. The interrelation of boundaries is a dynamism that makes the "scaffolding" of the comic book; these are the essential elements of the story: words, image, time, space, language, icons.

I argue that the *Scott Pilgrim*'s page analyzed here is a borderland matrix where all of the intervening boundaries are clearly represented. I will deconstruct each one of them: the economic boundary illustrated by the tequila bottle, the demographic one by the characters' nationalities and places of origin, the geographic boundaries by the setting —a fictional Toronto which is constantly permeated by foreign objects and characters who inhabit apartment buildings and bedrooms that could be located in any urban space in the world— the political boundaries illustrated by the characters naturally assuming and embodying their own "hybridness", and, finally, the cultural boundary by their interchangeable roles. All of this taking place in the most ambiguous sense of temporality accentuated by drunknness.

As I mentioned before, I will deconstruct each one of the icons represented in this page in order to demonstrate in depth how these permeable boundaries operate not only in the present sequence but also in the entire *Scott Pilgrim* series. To begin with, there is the issue of ambiguous sense of time. In this page, the iconic space is divided in three sets of panels: a large vertical panel at the left, an almost staggering square at the upper right, and a series of four sequential small panels at the bottom right. The large vertical panel sets a precedent; it provides the atmosphere and the information of what has happened, these characters were drunk already and have got even "more drunker" in just "a while", so that the caption "A while more drunker" works together with the drop spilt on the bottleneck that shows the action that has taken place: the alcohol has been poured and the bottle seems to have defeated the three characters. The characters have lost the sense of temporality: a few pages before the girls were waiting for Scott to finish a fight and the party was crowded and at its peak, whereas now they appear to be left alone in a bedroom separated from the rest of the people —"Is it home time?" Scott wonders— and he has also lost the ability to speak clearly, this is verifiable in both the speech balloons with fuzzy edges and the drunken talk.

Hence, an intoxicated state is decoded thanks to the use of graphic resources that contribute to build an ambiguous situation. And, even if only for a moment, such resources turn the roles a bit blurry, this has to do with cultural boundaries: this page makes the relationships between the characters confusing. For example, it is not clear who are the couple and who is the third wheel. The girls talk as if they were in love with each other, the triangle formed by these characters doesn't allow to distinguish clear boundaries that would make this situation look as if there was a couple and a chaperon. Why is one of the girls dressed in some sort of bridal gown? The boy is, in contrast, wearing an informal hoodie and tennis shoes. Again, juxtaposing these contrasting outfits doesn't make it clear if the celebration that took place was a wedding or a dressing up party, or if they all have or not attended the same event. The juxtaposition of all of these contrasting icons builds indeterminate zones that I understand as permeable boundaries.

In his book *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative. Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), Will Eisner asserts that balloons in comics are "given the task of adding meaning and conveying the character of sound to the narrative" (1985, 27) so that the tone of how something is being said is always illustrated and therefore "heard" by the reader and what the characters say is infinitely less important than how they say it.

But it is not only fuzzy balloons the icons that convey meaning in this page but the way in which the first and the last panels are linked by the used of tailless balloons. In both cases, the speakers are apparently invisible. Not entirely though. The sequence enables the reader to construe "the full picture." In the last panel, for instance, Ramona talks in amorous reciprocity to Kim while Scott fuels his own fantasy by encouraging the girls to "make out!" So is not only that he wouldn't feel left out but he is also manifesting that he would enjoy witnessing their liaison. This is remarkable if one takes into account that the plot of the entire series is about Scott fighting Ramona's evil ex-boyfriends in order to win her love; nevertheless, in this page, Scott demonstrates that his own ex-girlfriend, Kim, is welcome to interfere.

So, as I have mentioned, the characters' roles have been a bit blurred out throughout this concatenation of dialogues. A key point to this page's dynamism is the word "**BE**" (panel 4). This playful swap of identities is like a glimpse of a comedy of intrigue, where characters give up their assigned role in order to create a diffuse, dream like reality where, at least for a while —a panel, a page— the natural order is altered. Scott doesn't need to fight anyone; on the contrary, he cedes his powers to these girls. So each character is, in itself, a permeable boundary. Kim is not the ex-girlfriend who never falls in love, Ramona is not the object that Scott needs to defend the most and Scott is not the unbeatable fighter anymore.

In the comedy of intrigue, widely cultivated in dramatic traditions dating from the Spanish Golden Age and the Elizabethan Theatre, the use of mistaken identities is a recurrent resort: for example, a character talks in the darkness or behind closed doors in order to fool another character. The spectator, however, always knows who the speaker is; there is this implicit ability to "see through" the walls. In a very similar way, in this page of a comic book, thanks to the information gathered throughout the panels, Ramona’s reply to Kim is what “follows” the natural course of the dialogue and Scott’s imperative words confirm the role of observer, he is been laying down at Ramona’s feet while Kim is holding her (panel 2). The reader is capable to “see through” the building, through the images shown, or even beyond any other restricted view but, most importantly, the reader is able to see what happens in the blank space between panels, which, as has been previously stated, is known in comics’ terms as “the gutter”.

The gutter is a fundamental resource that enables the reader to connect the moments shown in this page. In McCloud’s analysis of the gutter included in his book *Understanding Comics* he states “in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (1994, 66). The art of comics is built by intermittences. Between each panel there is something that both stops and goes. On any page in any comic book, the gutter or space between panels is the blank area that allows the flow of the narrative. Thanks to what is not said, thanks to the leap of a panel to another, the reader knows that something happened; the reader is able to imagine or to fulfil the missing blank. This constant flashing sets the pace and the thread of the plot.

The core point in order to trigger the spectator/reader’s imagination, applicable to both comics and dramatic texts, is to build such solid situations that make the characters’ small “units and objectives” (Stanislavsky 1936, 42) so clear that the spectator is naturally able to fill in the gaps and to follow and play by the rules of this fictional world. It’s all about conventions. As visual forms of art theatre and comics establish a pact with the viewer who agrees to “see” and to “hear”, or, in one word, to believe in what is only being suggested visually. So that the reader of this page agrees to listen to the onomatopoeia “Smeck” that works together with the image of Ramona’s puckered lips (panel 5) in order to convey the action: of kissing Kim. In addition to this, in this page the first panel works as a threshold into the intimacy of this drunken atmosphere whereas the last panel is the exit to the urban world. Identifying such thresholds within comics is a key resource to discover cultural frontiers this is exemplified and explained to detail in the section titled “Vanishing Point.”

There is, however, another aspect that is relevant to the objectives of this thesis. Scott Pilgrim, widely known sober, is stumbling drunk not only because of having drank tequila but a specific type of it, "Tequila José Cuervo Especial" (panel 1). This is where political and economic boundaries come into play. There is a brand of a realistically depicted bottle which gained presence in Toronto thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada and the U.S., signed in 1992 to bring down barriers to the movement of goods along these territories and entered force January, 1st 1994, exactly the same day that 3, 000 members of EZLN upraised and seized a number of different locations in Chiapas protesting against what they identified as a serious threat for indigenous peoples and the preservation of national culture and identity. The international relevance of this movement can be summarized in what Gómez Peña describes as follows:

> Perhaps the very first statement against globalization with an international impact was made by the Zapatista rebels on 1st January 1994, the day that NAFTA went into effect. Unlike prior guerrilla movements, their main means of operation and communication with the outside world were performative actions, poetical communiqués, and the Internet. For several years (1994-1998), Zapatismo managed to reenergize all kinds of progressive movements and organizations worldwide, including arts collectives. During their legendary *Convenciones Intergalácticas*, which were like political Woodstocks, one could find in the Chiapaneca jungle people from every nationality, age, and creed: The common denominator was that they were all fighting the side-effects of globalization in their own countries and communities, from Chiapas to Japan, and from California to Western Europe. They were the first global resistance movement. (Gómez Peña 2001, 27).

In addition, one can argue that this treaty does not sound the "death knell" for national borders, as Patricia M. Goff asserts in her essay "Invisible Borders: Economic Liberalization and National Identity' "(2000); its existence rather means "that borders are present but permeable" and that this has caused some States to respond by: "reinforcing the invisible or conceptual borders held in place by cultural particularity, by collective identity, and by the common understandings that underpin a distinctive political community" (2000, 533). So there are two contrasting forces coming into play, one is an effort to amalgamate markets the other is to sell products that carry on them the "true" identity of their place of origin. The tequila label bearing the wax seal, medals, logo, brand, type and signature is precisely a strengthened or "reinforced" Mexican cultural icon. It meets all the requisites to be considered as the "real deal."

Following Goff's idea, one can argue that this page shows a "conceptual border" not because it is representative of a deep cultural juxtaposition. What this bottle represents is a commercial exchange, this is not a multi-cultural enriching experience; quite the opposite, it simply depicts two Canadians and a New Yorker drunk in legally imported, official Mexicanity. That is to say, this is an icon that has been licensed as truly Mexican and therefore transports Mexico within wherever it goes.

In his declarations published under the title "Mexico's Cultural Landscapes: A Conversation with Carlos Monsiváis" the Mexican writer got it right when he pointed out that NAFTA's aim had nothing to do with cultural exchange and it is not accurate to identify these examples as a "Mexicanization" of North America. This is rather: "a sense of increasing familiarity and acceptance of the Other's [Mexicans], from phrases and songs to cooking styles" (1999, 620). In this sense objects that can be commercialized as Mexican have gained presence in Canada and the United States but a deep understanding of the arts, culture, the idiosyncrasies and the complexity of Mexican society has not been labelled and exported.

Thanks to NAFTA professional workers of the three countries were enabled to get work permits (easier). This is where the narrative meets a demographic boundary because it makes sense for example that United States citizen Ramona works in Canada delivering *Amazon.ca* parcels; this is not only alluding to one of the world's largest online retailers but also to its Canadian branch. Ramona uses two means of transportation: by land, she travels on rollerblades, but the previously mentioned videogamesque reality allows her to also use sub-space highways a parallel reality that some of the other characters can also use for transportation. In order to keep her deliveries up-to-date Ramona has been accessing sub-space mainly through Scott's mind, who is, in consequence, madly in love with her. So sub-space, the videogame-like alternate reality, used by characters for fast-travel, is the issue of utmost concern here. It means that Ramona can infiltrate herself in Scott's mind and look at his thoughts and dreams. And these actions have had an effect on Scott's behaviour; his friends and relatives are for example, constantly reproaching him because of his lack of memory.

In addition, all throughout the series, there are also several references to Scott's oniric world. Not even the minds and the inner worlds of the characters are left untouched. According to sociologist Krishan Kumar, during the 19th century the presence of Utopia in Western literature could be associated to the aim of portraying society as a whole —with characters incarnating roles and patterns representative of their social function— whereas during the 20th century novel, the possibility of Utopia was displaced to the realm of the character's inner world, (2000, 256) private spaces that the reader of authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or Julio Cortázar gets to know through a deep sense of intimacy. In my opinion, *Scott Pilgrim* offers a complete reversal of this situation by portraying 21st century characters that find it impossible to remain unexposed, undisclosed. The book is obviously alluding to the fact that, in real life, people in the Western world appear to be just a click away from being found, pointed out, identified and, ultimately, invaded. And this is the most anti-utopian scenario. For Thomas More, one of the essentials of Utopia is the respectability of boundaries, as he describes it, in the Island of Utopia there are 54 cities, all of them measure the same size:

> The jurisdiction of every city extendeth at least 20 miles, and farther where they lie wider asunder. No one desireth to enlarge her boundary, for the people consider themselves in the light of good husbands, rather than owners, of their lands. (More 1808, 55).

So one can argue that the ultimate purpose of today's expansion and enlargement of boundaries is not to build a fair and equitable world or for people to "marry" their place of origin in perfect harmony but to bring boundaries down in order to deliver merchandise on time, to keep the business going and to permeate every possible space so that a very reduced group of people can increase their wealth. Authentic Mexicanity, or any other nationality, can reach anywhere in the world as long as there is someone willing to sell it and someone else intending to buy it. O'Malley's fictional world is, in my opinion, a parody of how this intricate network is tied to commercial interests rather than human and social development. It is not presented in a fatalistic tone with apocalyptic implications; on the contrary, it is a quite humorous and powerful parody of our daily anti-Utopian life.

Another good example that could be linked to the contemporary idea of invasion, spreadable media, and viral communication is the fact that Scott must defeat all of Ramona's evil exes who have organized themselves to fight him. They found each other and formed a League when Gideon, the evilest of them, got drunk and posted an ad on *Craiglist*… *Craiglist*! A website created to provide local classifieds. So, in this page (panel 2), Scott is resting after fighting a robot sent by the twin "And hot. And Japanese!" exes (O'Malley 2010, 81).

So the Internet, videogames and international relations are very well parodied "texts". By mocking the multiple uses of Internet based services, or a group of young adults living as if they were part of a virtual reality and eating anything from salmon nigiri to Italian garlic bread, O'Malley illustrates a fictional Canada permeated by icons of any imaginable country and culture. The result: a satire of how in everyday circumstances, like the one in this page, concepts such as "local", "identity" or "territory", all of them key elements to the narrative's meaning, have become vague and ambiguous but, at the same time, exhaustively defined. It might be possible to eat sushi or Indian food anywhere in the world, but most of these restaurants would also claim to be "authentic." The reason why I understand this as a satire is in the high sense of sarcasm and self-criticism revealed all throughout the comic. The same characters taking part in a "Día de muertos" celebration are criticizing such "cultural bonanza". Another relevant example of this is the fact that the story begins with Scott dating a Chinese teenager who belongs to a very traditional family. There is no accidental use of multicultural icons and such awareness is a fundamental aspect of the narrative. This is 21st century Canada where people can drink, eat or listen to music coming from any corner of the world. But they are not quite entirely from anywhere in particular. The following two page spread, taken from the same volume is a very illustrative example of this:

Figure 8. O'Malley, Bryan Lee. (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (London:

Fourth Estate Ltd., 55).

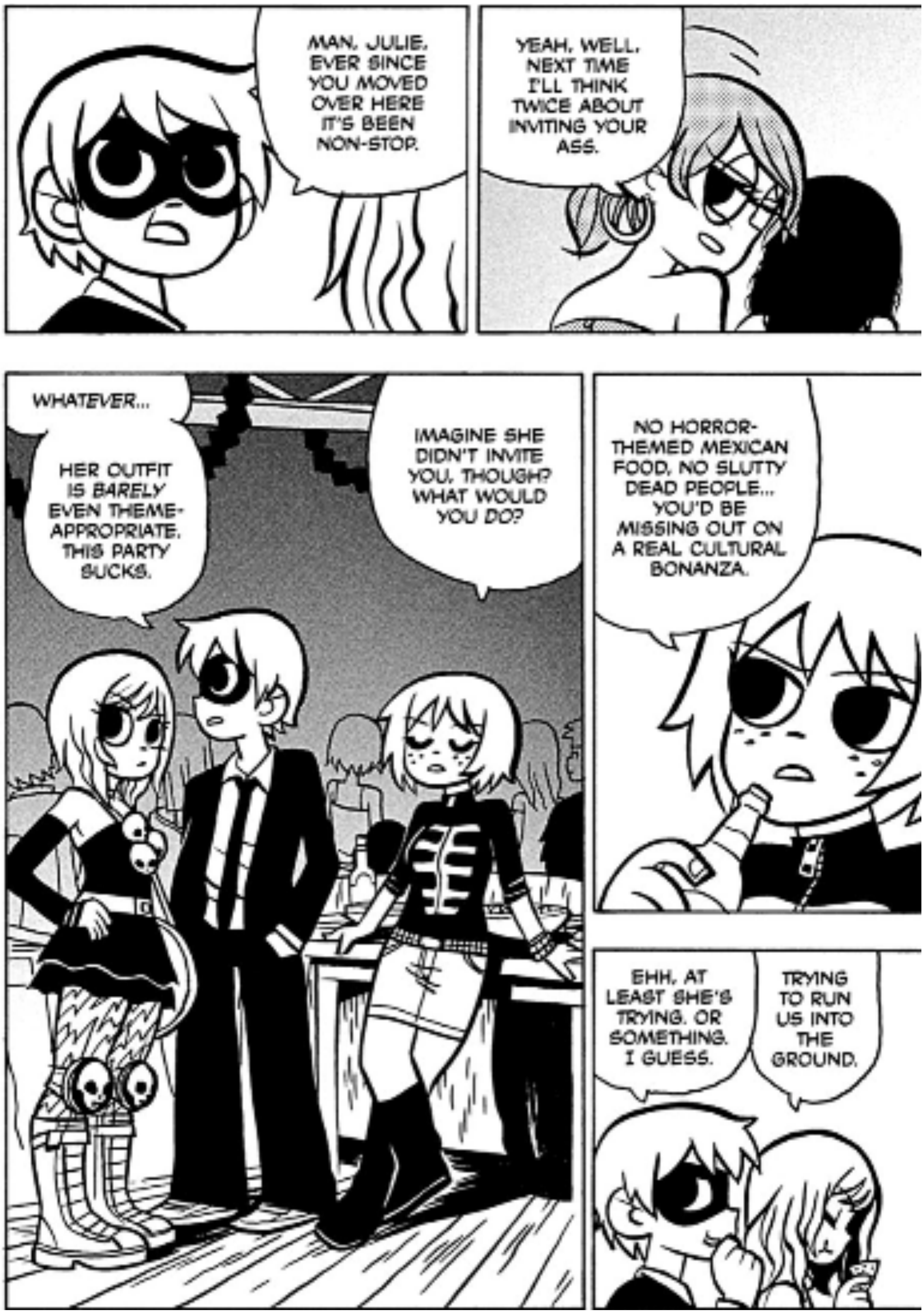


Figure 9. O'Malley, Bryan Lee. (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 56).

Canada is the country with the highest per capita immigration rate[1] in the world and it is therefore one of the most pluralist societies that can be found. The author, Bryan Lee O'Malley is half Korean and half French-Canadian of Irish ancestry. His fictional Toronto is presented as a dynamic frontier, not only because of the actual proximity of this city and the border between Canada and the United States but also because of all the multiple boundaries that merge in it. These facts that have to do with the prefiguration of the comic are translated as visible permeable boundaries in the configuration of the *Scott Pilgrim* pages cited above.

There is in fact so much to say about the fictional Toronto these characters live in, which is in one hand like any other major city where young (and not so young) people tend to have temporary homes and move from one apartment to the other all the time (panel 4). One can argue that there is no sense of permanence: no permanent job, no permanent relationship, no permanent evil ex to defeat, Scott's parents are living in "Europe" where all they do is "spending Euros" —or so Scott says— and when they are back in Canada they are happy to buy a new apartment for his son. Stability or traditional patterns of behaviour are not an essential part of this fictional world. *Scott Pilgrim*'s Toronto is, in addition, a very permeated space because of the constant appearance of threatening characters coming and going from New York, infusing a very consistent and dynamic narrative rhythm all throughout the comic. Gideon threatens to send the evil exes, Envy threatens Scott when she is back in Toronto, all of them making unexpected appearances and propitiating fights. In this two page spread some of the elements mentioned before appear again: the interchange of roles in dressing up parties (panel 1) a Canadian version of a Day of the Dead celebration (panel 3) with a mariachi-like skull hanging from the ceiling and a speech balloon in Spanish which is a literal translation of what has been said previously as represented in the speech balloon in English right next to it; in its original form in Spanish the celebration is called simply "Día de muertos" [Day of dead] without the article "los" [the] a very subtle difference that still denotes that this is also

---

[1] According to a News Release published by the Government of Canada on February 2013, this country welcomed 257,515 permanent residents in 2012. Each year since 2006, Canada has admitted an average of about a quarter of a million immigrants. (http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2013/2013-02-27.asp)

the case of a Mexican icon seen from abroad. The characters are completely aware of this and deal with it in a playful way, Scott says: “her outfit is barely even theme-appropriate” (panel 6) and Kim’s ironic remark on the Mexican party “real cultural bonanza” (panel 7). In *Scott Pilgrim* an uncertain world of permeable boundaries is constantly built, even in those sequences that would not seem like crucial narrative events. And this is precisely what I find most relevant in relation to my thesis subject.

The following example offers a very significant and contrasting reality that clearly illustrates differences between Canada and the United States.

Telenovelas and Vampires: Identifying the Local Foreigner

In this section of the thesis I cover a number of basic facts related to Mexican cultural icons that have been displaced to multicultural environments. In these new spaces they have gradually turned into markers of quotidian otherness or local foreignness. The prolific Hernandez brothers were pioneers in introducing comics of fictional worlds permeated not only by Mexicanity but also by other Hispanic communities in the United States: “If you look at Gilbert Hernandez, he works with the pre-Columbian cultures not just from Mexico but he fuses them: Inca, Mayan, Cholula and you get them all in his figures. So there is this sort of pan-Latino-semiotic-Indigenismo in his work and he is from California.” (Nericcio 2011, n.p.). In *Life Sucks* it is assumed that one of the multiple cultural icons present in the narrative has got to be Mexican, and this is represented without making use of folkloric icons. I have therefore selected one of the first pages of this comic book in order to analyze it applying the concepts of Xicanosmosis proposed by William Nericcio. This graphic novel is based in Los Angeles “and for that matter, in outer space” (Nericcio 2007, 194) and makes a direct allusion to the vast Chicano community in this city.

In order to proceed to the formal analysis of a comic book page taken from *Life Sucks* it is first necessary to explain the terms “Chicano” and “osmosis” and how are these being used within the present research. The word “chicano”, or “xicano”, is the abbreviation of the word “mexicano”, which derived from the Nahuatl term used to designate the land of origin, "Meshico", of a Mesoamerican ethnic group. During the cultural and social movements of the decades of 1960's and 1970's in the United States, the term Chicano was adopted by Mexican minorities to identify and emphasize the ethnic difference of their community and their right to occupy ancient Meshica territory. Currently, according to the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy, the term Chicano is academically correct to designate United States citizens of Mexican origin. The term comprises therefore a link between past and recent history and a vindication of this cultural group:

> Chicano cultural imaginary seems a site where the interaction between absence and presence elemental to the dynamic of melancholy is ever at play. The unnameable (suggestive of the modernist sublime but ever more evasive) and the representable create an unending tension. (Villa 2000, 17).

In addition to these tensions mentioned by Villa, that will be exemplified in the following pages in the case of *Life Sucks*, it is also necessary to identify how is the Hispanic world singled out and classified within the United States. This can be verified in a survey, used by the government agency called, United States Census Bureau. Since 1970, the census includes a question aimed to identify individuals of Hispanic origin. Over the years it has been modified, new options have been added in order to obtain an answer as specific as possible, some of which are explained below:

> The new Hispanic question(s) specifically asks "Are you/Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino?" Persons responding "yes" are then asked a subsequent question, "Are you/Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Cuban-American, or some other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino group? (…) A probe question is used to elicit more specific information about people responding affirmative to the "Other" category. (MacDonald 2001, 365).

Through the story of a character with a Mexican family and a few details of her community, *Life Sucks* addresses a relationship with Mexico rather than the wider relationship with the "Latino" world, the members of which account for 15% of the United States population. Latinos are the largest minority in this country, 64% of them are of Mexican origin and can be called Chicanos.

Having stated all this, it is also necessary to explain that William Nericcio compares the cultural process between Mexico's north borderlands and the United States to the biological process of osmosis, which as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is:

> **1** *Biology* & *Chemistry* a process by which molecules of a solvent tend to pass through a semipermeable membrane from a less concentrated solution into a more concentrated one.
>
> **2** the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas, knowledge, etc.: *by some strange political osmosis, private reputations became public*

Of all the books analyzed in this thesis, *Life Sucks*, a fictional narrative where the main characters are vampires struggling to exist in Los Angeles, is the most representative example of a fictional world where individuals have established a dialogic relationship with diverse cultural icons present in their everyday life. Therefore, within this narrative, the act of constant passing through "semipermeable membranes" is a given fact, just like breathing. For Nericcio this is an explanation of the cultural exchange and interconnection of multiple aspects juxtaposed in one geographical area:

> How appropriate that the biological sciences should provide, for those of us who study arts and culture, a ready model to describe processes to be found in the border that divides and, equally as importantly, defines the cultural dynamics between the United States and Mexico. "Appropriate" in that "biological" concerns and constructs such as "ethnicity," "genotype," and "phenotype" –those *markers* of "human" difference– come to the fore at the U.S.-Mexico border: a place where denizens on both sides of Checkpoint Charlie must confront, celebrate, and loathe each other's difference on a regular basis." (2007, 195).

I argue that the greatest achievement in *Life Sucks*' narrative is that all of the characters are very aware of their "markers", their belonging to different ethnic and socio-economic groups and this is extrapolated to the fact that some of them are vampires obliged to adapt to the world of the living. Vampires are in fact a metaphor of the local foreigner: from a Mexican or a Rumanian immigrant to a working class white character trying to "make a living" in a urban space greatly conditioned by characters empowered, not only by their ethnic background, but also by their high purchasing power. Thus, in spite of counting on a vast demographic diversity, Los Angeles is often a rather alienating metropolis where otherness never ceases to be singled out, as Goff asserts:

> Permeable territorial borders may no longer be effective in keeping out the "outside" –foods, people, ideas, and capital from "outside" continually flow into national territories and vice versa. But reinforcement of the identity that underpins political community has the effect of demarcating "inside" from "outside" at the conceptual level. This policy presumes that members of a political community are aware that their sense of belonging to that group is based on the embrace of a specific worldview. (2000, 539).

The following page is an example taken from one of the first sequences in *Life Sucks*, in which the main character, Dave, a young renegade vampire, has just got up to go to work:

Figure 10. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 7).

After getting out of bed reluctantly, Dave pulls a bottle of blood plasma out of the fridge. He then manifests how much he dislikes his source of nourishing, suitable for a vampire who disapproves killing people for blood, this is shown with gestures and not with words: closing his eyes and pressing his nose (panel 1), gulping and frowning (panel 2) and cleaning his mouth with a disgusted grimace (panel 3). There is also a parallelism between Dave's body language and the woman crying on the TV screen (panel 4); this resort is a playful glimpse to reinforce the idea that Dave is definitely not waking up to the most cheering reality. However, when he seats next to his housemate (panel 5) and they share a friendly greeting, he manages to smile (panel 6). I think Dave and Carl's complicity is portrayed in these three wordless panels very successfully and this is why it is easier for the reader to believe how they both plunge very naturally into their daily life watching a Mexican soap opera (panel 7-8).

Very important pieces of information are provided in this sequence: Dave lives with a harmless non-vampire housemate who feeds himself with unintimidating food such as cereal. Details like Carl's seating with his legs stretched watching a banal show and wearing a sock with a hole (panel 6) depict him as a rather laid back character who is not even slightly afraid of sharing his home with a vampire. In fact, as it is shown in section 2.4, Dave and Carl's friendship has been strengthened through the years partly because they have grown up together and have both protected each other from social exclusion. Dave and Carl's friendship has been strengthened through the years partly because they have grown up together and have both protected each other from social exclusion. As David Sibley asserts "Western culture is based on exclusion" (566, 1997). These two characters represent young people who have grown up in a context where they have suffered from ethnic and economic exclusion. But they have also found a way to create a space of their own, and to adapt an imposed environment to their own needs. In their essay "Children's Geographies: Some Problems of Representation" Sarah James and David Sibley agree on something that in my opinion also applies for teenagers and young adults such as the main characters of *Life Sucks*: "It is essential for human geographers to be sensitive to the particular worlds of childhood and to the oppression experienced in adult environments" (1991, 270) I argue that these young characters -Carl, David, Rosa- have found ways to negotiate with the oppression of an excluding adult environment.

As for the show they are watching, the telenovela [soap opera] "El

Amor de los Amores” (panel 7), it is relevant to highlight that the title is preserved in Spanish but nouns are capitalized as if it was written in English; the correct spelling would be “El amor de los amores.” So, there are multiple permeable boundaries in this page that show a working-class white man —and reluctant vampire— with his Afro-American housemate watching a Mexican television show addressed to United States spectators and broadcasted by Mexican producers. This apparently trivial sequence is a summary of a very broad subject of this book: assimilation. All throughout the novel, there are characters of diverse ethnic backgrounds such as South Asian, Eastern European or Latin American, to name just a few, and all of them are very aware of their belonging or not belonging to a certain ethnic minority. Thus, almost every page in this novel recreates how simple it is to enter into cultural frontiers in everyday life Los Angeles, a city where a wide variety of nationalities, ethnic groups and cultures co-exist and interact all the time but also struggle to culturally assimilate.

If compared with the example analyzed in the previous section of this thesis, there are countless contrasts between fictional *Life Sucks* L.A. and *Scott Pilgrim*’s Toronto. The first one is Los Angeles depicted as a city of local foreigners. In comparison, *Scott Pilgrim’s* multi-ethnic Toronto doesn’t seem to create the same kind of tensions between its inhabitants. In fact, none of the characters in *Scott Pilgrim* experiments their sexual orientation, ethnic background or socio-economic situation as a cause of rejection. All of them appear to be prosocial and competent at interpersonal skills. Scott is, for most part of the series, unemployed but he never lacks housing, food or social integration. And when he faces even his toughest enemies everyone trusts in his good reputation as proficient fighter. In other words, life simply “doesn’t suck” for Scott as it does for Dave. What these two characters do have in common is: a humorous approach to their situation, whatever challenges lie ahead, which facilitate readers to empathize with both of them. There is also a progressive strengthening of their skills in both cases. By the end of both stories, the characters appear to have earned something and they are closer to their self-realization.

The evolution of Dave’s character and its implications with respect to iconic displacement are explained in the sub-section titled “Vampires: the Iconic Metaphor of Migrants”. For the time being, I would argue that this is a clear example of how, within the realm of culture and the arts, it is of upmost importance to understand characters, time and space as porous areas. It has become completely necessary to transform the idea of borders as static places, where individuals can actually stand in one side or the other, to zones of convergence that move not only outside but also inside migrants. In an interview Nericcio conceded to me, I asked him what his view of the frontier, as a movable or portable quality, would be:

> So much of the immigrant experiences is re-establishing new identities in the new context. But my problem with that are, for example, writers such as Carlos Fuentes who uses the metaphor of a wound or Gloria Anzaldúa who speaks of an open wound. In *Tex{t}-Mex* I talk about the process of *Xicanosmosis*, for me that's better, I was going to be an oncologist so I love the biological metaphor. What I see happen at the border really is osmosis, the same thing that happens in the lungs: the movement to semi-permeable boundaries substance. That's what you find between Mexico and the United States. And it blows both ways. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

The creative work of the authors of *Life Sucks* goes through their own cultural filter. The more they have immersed in the multiple social realities that they explore, the more their own boundaries have been permeated by them, and their pre-conceptions challenged or affected by it, but not entirely eradicated or cancelled. The authors' cultural horizons are therefore not erasable but permeable and porous. This is not necessarily a limitation, as in my opinion was the case of Baudoin and Troub's that will be addressed on the section titled "The "Superchild" in Ciudad Juarez", but this can also become a tool that infuses comic books with endless possibilities and potential to produce unique works. This is the case of *Life Sucks*, a comic book situated in a multicultural entourage where it is understood that a diversity of worldviews come into play. This novel is actually partly a continuation of Abel's exploration of the Mexican world within the United States. A similar example is the book *Drawn to New York*, which is reviewed in the section called "Politics in the Times of Comics" and it was also in many ways influenced by Kuper's experience in Oaxaca. And just like it happens to the character of Carla in *La Perdida* when she is back in Chicago, she discovers that her search for Mexico was only started during her year living there. The process is therefore endless. It is also visible that in a book like *La pipa de Marcos*, the author's and the characters' search is not so much about Mexico but about themselves.

It is worthy of mention the case of the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, who has lived in Mexico City for nearly 30 years and has had displacement as one of his central topics of exploration. Mexico's northern borderland has inspired his creative process in more than one occasion. For instance, in 1997 his performance called "The Loop for InSITE" was part of an exhibition held in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico. It consisted in travelling from Tijuana to the near Californian city of San Diego, a journey that would usually take a few minutes by car. Alÿs' trip, however, was one month and five days long since he decided not to cross the Mexico-United States border and took a lengthy detour stopping over in Mexico City, Panama City, Sydney, Bangkok, Vancouver, Los Angeles and finally, San Diego. This was the artist's comment on legal immigration, and the conflictive frontier between these two countries. Likewise many other of his performances involve walking or displacing himself from one position to another tracing and documenting his trajectory, this has been a crucial aspect of his own endless exploration process as "local foreigner." He describes it as follows:

> For a moment I really thought that was it. But in reality it was different. The moment I started to formulate this more horizontal-topographical mapping of the works (rather than a vertical-chronological reading), I saw only holes that I couldn't talk about or fill… So that resulted in an intensification of my investigation and not a conclusion of it. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that I have started to lose my aloofness, my distance as an outsider, that I am entering into a second phase, a new way of reading things, without this kind of protective filter. (2006, 128).

In order to remove the "protective filter" and to provide a "horizontal reading" of these comics it is necessary to detect not only the author's background and worldview but also the political and historical legacy involved. For example, in the case of *Life Sucks*, I argue that the relation between Mexico and the United States and how stereotypes work here can also be comparable to traces of colonial thought coming, for instance, from Europe and regarding Latin America. The response of Nericcio regarding a question on this issue was:

> Just like you have intrastate and interstate highways, you also have intra-stereotypes and inter-stereotypes. The intra-state relationship between Spain to Latin America brings into play other stereotypes that need to be studied almost externally. And then there is the history of the relationship between Spain “después de la conquista” [after the Conquest] with “América Latina” [Latin America]. Now England and the United States have a different special relationship, that’s also because of war. In World War II, the Alliance was their special relationship. But, at the worst period of the Bush years, I would see it on my trips to London; there was a visible anti-Americanism within England. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

It is also worth of mention that Kuper decided to leave the United States in this same critical period of “the Bush years”:

> It was a time in 2006 when we were on the second term of George Bush’s presidency and we very much wanted a “escape” so we arrived in Oaxaca thinking that we were going to get away from it all in a small town just in time for the PFP [Federal Preventive Police] to arrive and have this exploding situation there with the “manifestación de los maestros” [teacher’s demonstration]. I realized I wasn’t trying to escape I just wanted something else and I draw about political topics all the time. So this was an opportunity to explore a completely different culture but still political and get the influence of the art of Oaxaca and Mexico in general and I found it, it turned my mind in so many different directions that I am still in the process of digesting the information. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

In a narrative like *Life Sucks* the case of inter-stereotypes becomes very easy to identify. The foreignness of a Mexican family in Los Angeles, as is the case of some of the characters in *Life Sucks,* is a local aspect of this city, sometimes nicknamed as “Mexico’s second largest city.” The possible alienation of an Afro-American character, as is the case of Carl who was always protected by Dave during their high school years, is also another inter-stereotype. National identities and cultural markers will therefore always raise tensions, especially when related to migration; but, in this case study on Mexican cultural icons, instead of regarding them under the standard model of a “conquistador-conquistado” relationship, I argue that permeability is more useful and accurate in order to fully understand its dynamics. There has always been, as Nericcio points out, a “transfer of cultural material across borders.” (Nericcio 2011, n.p.). And this type of transfer is precisely what Alÿs and Kuper describe as a crucial aspect of their creative processes respectively.

Equally important is the fact that this local foreignness is often represented oscillating between two poles: craving and aversion. Foreignness can be the object of desire, in *Life Sucks* it is the case of Rosa, the character of Mexican descent for whom Dave falls in love. However, in spite of being a smart, self-determined young woman, Rosa is also very much aware of her ambivalent condition of being the object of both craving and aversion:

Figure 11. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 157).

In the interview Nericcio conceded to me, he responded to a question regarding these two levels of interest on behalf of the comic book authors analyzed in the present research making reference to a key aspect of his own work:

> My work is all about tracking the evolution of hate as manifested in popular entertainment. We do not think of popular entertainment as hate, but conflict is there. Conflict and desire, which is why the Mexican bandit is a negative stereotype but not everybody is uncomfortable with the idea of Latinos as great lovers. They travel together. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

In **Figure 11** After being dumped by Wes, a wealthy white young man, Rosa confesses all her insecurities to Dave without knowing that he is secretly in love with her and also ignoring that he is a vampire. She recognizes all the differences between her and the social group that Wes represents (panel 1) and when her point of view is challenged by Dave (panel 2) she makes allusion to wellknown cultural stereotypes that work as minority-markers. The first one being illegal immigration in the United States introduced by the iconic sequence "wet-back", referring to migrants that cross the Mexico-United States border swimming the Río Bravo. Another one is the iconic sequence "Goth" that refers to the subculture initiated in England in the 1980's during the post-punk era and reproduced and perpetuated in many countries around the world. Rosa is completely aware of the fact that she embodies a minority within the minority, this being an obvious echo of characters such as Maggie and Hopey from the legendary series *Locas* (1981-1996) —created by Jaime Hernandez. *Locas* features two female characters of Mexican descent, which are also homosexual and punk— And then she goes on building herself in opposition to what Wes is thanks to his privileged inherited social position (panel 4-5). The sub-text in this sequence can be identified by what Rosa is saying in relation to the rest of the elements represented in this page. The idea of "I do not want to want him" is linked to how Dave is feeling, since he is after all, a hungry vampire under the full moon and he is resisting the urge of biting Rosa's neck (panel 5). As for Rosa, she thinks that the only possible solution to redeem her condition is by being able to displace herself to an empowered position of wealth (panel 6).

I therefore consider that the page cited above condenses the conflict and desire dichotomy as appointed by Nericcio. As it is demonstrated in the sub-section called “Vampires: the Iconic Metaphor of Migrants” by the end of the novel, all of the characters learn something about the treachery of representation and seem to be more aware of their power to overcome their own sense of foreignness.

In the following sections I will explain a series of very specific social, political and cultural factors related to Mexico that have enabled these types of narratives based on contemporary Mexican issues to exist in the comic book format. I also find it relevant to expose a few core aspects of the broader picture of the comics creative scene in order to pin point the relation between the narratives analyzed here and other comics based on a multiplicity of topics. I also analyze each one of the comic books that conform the main corpus of my study focusing on specific issues of iconic displacement.

CHAPTER 1:

Deconstructing Mexican Topics in Contemporary Comics

In the present chapter I explain the ways in which a series of very specific factors related to Mexico (such as the NAFTA agreement, the upraising of the EZLN, the feminicides in Ciudad Juarez, massive illegal migration and bidirectional migration) have enabled certain social, political and cultural narratives based on contemporary Mexican issues to exist in the comic book format. I also explain the ways in which those factors relate to a number of examples of what have become cultural identifiers of Mexico (the Tijuana's Zebra Donkeys, Victoria Beer) and Latin America (the term "Chiquita", the Latin American revolutionary leader), which are usually transferred to almost any country in this region regardless if it's a non-Hispanic country such as Brazil, for example, as it is discussed on the section called "Chiquita and the Very Very Tropical Latin America." The icon of the revolutionary leader, on the other hand, is also a cultural marker that has shaped a sentiment of identity often applicable to all of the Spanish-American countries.

The factors mentioned above have been massively covered by the international media, a circumstance that has enabled numerous foreign authors to become interested in Mexican current issues. The books I study represent a recurrent topic in current comics production and have been selected because of their narrative cohesion, the fact that all of the authors have travelled to Mexico at the turn of or in the first years of the 21st century and have represented their experiences during their stay in the country.

In this section of the thesis I argue that the authors studied here share very visible tendencies to portray both "conflict" and "desire" in their treatment of cultural and socio-political issues, something illustrated by their constant search for main cultural icons such as Frida Kahlo and while representing the aforementioned political situations. I show that each one of the graphic works studied present two main discursive levels: the appreciation for what is identified as Mexican culture, and a strong criticism on the politics and social disparities that accompany these newly discovered realities.

Most of the authors studied in this thesis are non-native Spanish speakers, their condition of temporal visitors seem to be reflected by their limited ability to represent everyday life in Mexico City and the inclusion of prefigured notions; however, all of the works analyzed here show an interest in Mexico’s most recurrent localisms and expressions.

In this section, I tackle this issue and the general issue of language as a cultural icon by including a section dedicated to the operation of code-switching. I explain code-switching as a fundamental aspect for the construction of cultural boundaries, that is to say a vehicle for the juxtaposition of ideologies, systems of belief and behavioural patterns. As one of the most effective resorts to introduce the migrant’s conflict to culturally assimilate in a new environment, the use of code-switching allows these authors to carry out a complex representation of issues such as migration and displacement.

1.1. Mexicanity and Latin American Cultural Identifiers

As it has been discussed in the section titled “Iconic Mexicanity,” this thesis deals with comics that involve the use of, both, icons of national culture that could be widely known internationally and icons that are mostly known only by local residents of Mexico.

As I have shown, in the art of comics, zones of permeable, indefinite boundaries are created when an icon of national and cultural identity is juxtaposed with the worldview of a foreigner. This somewhat indeterminate sense is, I argue, what builds the cultural frontier I refer to. An example of this could be verified in the use of language, the boundary of language is never fixed in none of these comics; even when the author’s intention is to use one language, there is a sometime unconscious use of code-switching. This resort is explained in detail in the section titled “Code-Switching: the Language as Cultural Icon.” For the time being I will only use it as an example in order to illustrate its enormous potential to make allusion to deeply rooted icons of national identity. The following panel taken from *La Perdida* illustrates this situation:

Figure 12. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 11).

Two Mexican taxi drivers talk about Carla, who has just arrived at the airport in Mexico City and is wearing folkloric clothing. She has refused to take a taxi and has left in search of the subway. The text in the speech balloons is written in Spanish while the English translation can be read in the text box at the bottom of the panel. A translation that admits the use of the word "burro" [donkey] reflects the fact that Mexico is associated with donkeys. This is not only due to the connection to peasants carrying their loads in them but also because there are in Tijuana several beer drinking "zebra donkeys" (animals painted with stripes so that they look like the offspring of a zebra and a donkey). Since the 1940's this has been an attraction for certain United States tourists that go there in search of party and a surreal experience. The origin of this "tradition" seems to be the fact that tourists in the first half of the 20th century who took a picture with a white haired donkey would want it to stand out as it appeared to be hardly noticeable when the photograph was revealed. In order to correct this situation, and to keep on attracting tourism, local entrepreneurs started painting black stripes on the animal so it would be clearly visible in the black and white pictures of that time.

Figure 13. Zazzle (2012) “Burro" (Accessed on 3 July 2012. www.zazzle.com/burro)

Figure 13 is a logo emulating Milton Glaser’s “I ♥ New York” is a clear example of Tijuana being associated with the “burro.” So the simple use of a word such as this or other distinctive representations always carries a multiplicity of cultural references that can apply not only to Mexico but also to Latin America in general. In order to further illustrate this and to elaborate on my understanding of a widely spread Mexican cultural icon and its broad network of meanings, I will use a couple of loose examples, the following two examples are taken from *La Perdida* and *La pipa de Marcos* respectively:

Figure 14. Abel, Jessica (2006) La Perdida (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

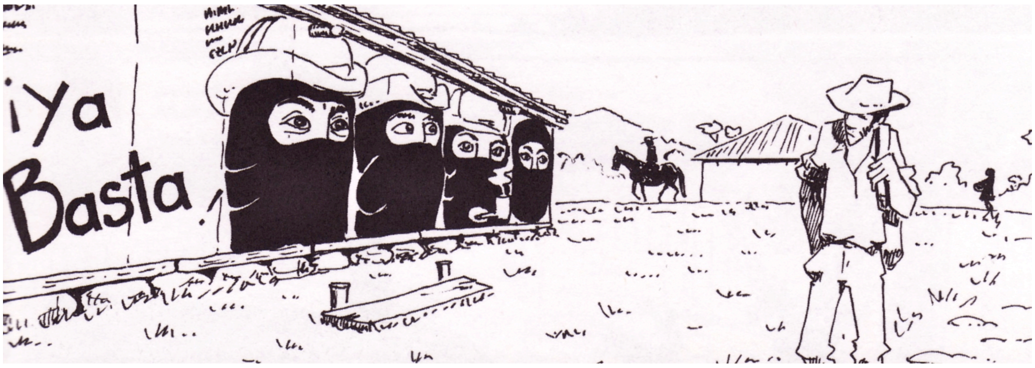


Figure 15. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 105).

Figure 14, introduces the term “chiquita” while **Figure 15** involves a well-known image, the balaclava covered face associated to Sub-Commandant Marcos. In spite of their very different styles, the works of Abel and De Isusi have lots in common. They are both writers and illustrators. They also share a foreign observer’s point of view since both of them travelled to Mexico and spent some time living in the cities that inspired their comics. Original from Chicago, Abel moved for a couple of years to Mexico City while De Isusi, born in Bilbao, spent three months as international observer in the community of La Realidad, Chiapas. Nevertheless, instead of producing autobiographical travel books they both chose a fictional, novelistic format.

1.1.2. Chiquita and the Very Very Tropical Latin America

I will start by looking in detail at the panel taken from *La Perdida* where the character of Harry screams angrily at his interlocutor:

Figure 14. Abel, Jessica (2006) La Perdida (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

In the first place it should be noted that Harry's hair is uncoloured as to represent him as blonde and white, that is to say, an ethnicity that fits into the mould used by Carla, the main character, who describes him a few pages before as one of those "East Coast blue bloods" (2006, 14) found in the United States, their native country. His left hand is leaning on the laptop's keyboard while the other one is holding a bottle firmly; there's a juxtaposition of two ideas: work and leisure. The frowning face, the "reddened" cheeks, the open mouth and expressions such as "Fuck you" or "What is that piece of shit?" communicate anger, hostility and probably drunkenness, and contrast with "friendlier" words like "I am doing just fine" or "chiquita"; the latter being the only word in Spanish. "Chiquita" is a female diminutive adjective that might be used as an affectionate way to call someone "little one."

Now, "chiquita" is a cultural national iconic term not only because it has slipped in a conversation in English between two United States nationals living in Mexico, but also because it unveils a long background from popular culture. This word has been present within the English collective imaginary for, at least, 70 years. It is relatable to the characters played by Portuguese-born Brazilian actress, Carmen Miranda, whose films became very popular in Hollywood during the 1930's and the 1940's. And it was also in the middle of this decade that a brand of imported fruit, "Chiquita", hired cartoonist Dik Browne, author of the comic strip *Hägar the Horrible* (1973-1988) to draw "Miss Chiquita", a character with the face of a banana and the legs of a tropical dancer. In 1987, the Argentinean cartoonist, Óscar Grillo, was in charge to transform her into a woman. The following images illustrate the vast universe behind the use of the term "chiquita":

Figure 16. Morris, Gary (1996) “Carmen Miranda: *Bananas Is My Business*” (Accessed on 13 June 2012. http://brightlightsfilm.com/16/carmen.php).

Figure 17. Chiquita (2011) “Miss Chiquita” (Accessed on 9 May 2012 http://www.chiquita.com/Our-Company/The-Chiquita-Story/Miss-Chiquita.aspx).

Figure 18. Chiquita (2011) “Miss Chiquita” (Accessed on 9 May 2012 http://www.chiquita.com/Our-Company/The-Chiquita-Story/Miss-Chiquita.aspx).

In **Figure 16** appears Miranda’s coloured picture as published in the Brazilian magazine *O Cruzeiro* in 1940. It was taken from a black and white poster of the show “Streets of Paris” presented in New York.

As for **Figure 17** it shows the animated character created by Dik Browne in 1944, it was inspired in Miranda’s jingles and choreographies. Back in the day, bananas were still considered to be exotic fruits and “Miss Chiquita” was created to “teach consumers about the great nutrional value of bananas and how to ripen them.” (Chiquita 2011, n.p.)

Finally, **Figure 18** shows one of the first designs created in 1987 by Oscar Grillo who turned the brand’s character into a woman that resembles Carmen Miranda.

Following these icons it can be inferred that “chiquita” implies “fiesta”, colour, happiness, femininity, fruits, abundance and music all at once. But, above all these, “chiquita” means otherness. That’s why the term is relatable to a Brazilian actress who signs in Portuguese, to pineapples from Costa Rica or to a famous banana jingle sang by an animated fruit character with a thick Latin American Spanish accent that likes the climate of the “very very tropical equator” and therefore shall never be kept “inside the refrigerator”. In one word, “chiquita” is linked to the vast otherness beyond the United States border regardless if it is located in North, Central or South America. And such otherness is associated, as a general rule, with sunny weather, voluptuous women, superficial behaviour, and few well-known words in Spanish or festive music from rumba and samba to cumbia and salsa.

What is then, in the sole panel from *La Perdida* analyzed in this example, the element that gives a hint of where in Latin America is this situation settled? The message is actually in the bottle. The character is not holding just any beverage; he is drinking from a two pint “Victoria” beer bottle (the letters “V” and “I” can be seen on a fragment of its label) that in real life would look like this:

Figure 19. Grupo Modelo (2011) “Victoria” (Accessed on 13 June 2012 http://www.gmodelo.mx/victoria.jsp).

Victoria is a Mexican beer of approximately 100 years old that, back in 2006, when this graphic novel was published, was only sold, and proudly so, in Mexico. The marketing campaign was very much oriented to highlight Mexico's exclusivity of this traditional beer, a few television spots depicted United States citizens crossing the border just to enjoy a sip of "la Victoria de México". It wasn't until 2010 that this beer was exported to the United States for the first time. And this is relevant for the present study as it depicts a character that is not drinking, for example, *Corona* —one of the top selling imported beers in the world— but a long-established local beer.

To simply emphasize the importance of this icon as a local reference I would like to briefly have a look at an example by Kuper:

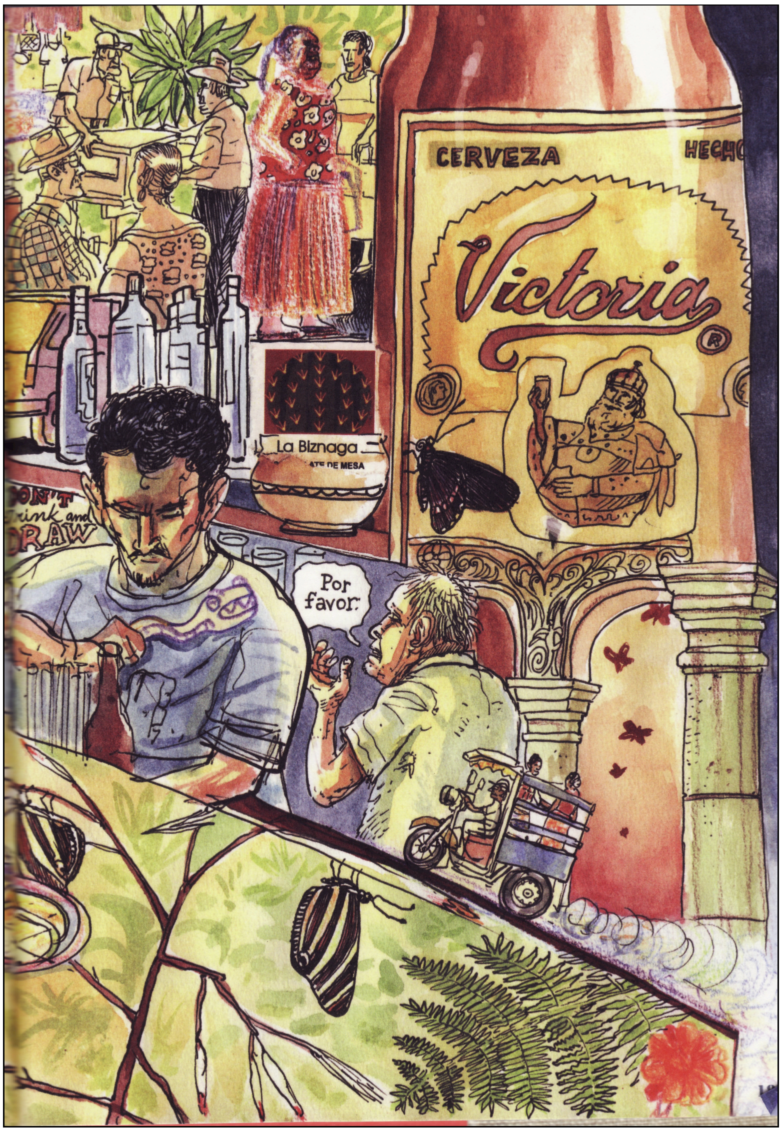


Figure 20. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 45).

In **Figure 20** Kuper presents a montage not only of Mexican flavours but also of the experience of seating down and observing the surroundings while eating and drinking. There is an allusion to “La Biznaga,” a famous local restaurant, and to *Kahlúa,* a national liquor, as well as a multiplicity of scenes one could have access to. And life, of course, goes on, with people meeting in restaurants, a young boy listening to a street musician and butterflies that have arrived escaping from the freezing weather up north. As can be seen, it is by analyzing one by one of the icons, that the most quotidian scene proves to be conveying a message of both tranquillity and uncertainty where, in spite of its familiarity, nothing is guaranteed to remain as it is. Tradition and change are completely juxtaposed. And, on the right hand side, there is also a notorious presence of *Victoria* beer.

The reinforced icon of a national beer has a function. In both cases it is affirming that the scene is taking place in Mexico and nowhere else. In the panel taken from *La Perdida* there is a “blue blood” white man, playing a modern Kerouac by trying to write a novel and getting intoxicated in the folkloric and even “tropical” Mexico City. Kuper has a few elements of that Kerouac, since he is embellished by Mexico, but he is not naïf as Abel’s character. As it will be demonstrated, all throughout the book, Jessica Abel builds characters making deliberate and conscious use of all of these resorts which demonstrate a competent command of the multiple icons available in order to represent the reality of a foreigner living in the idealized Mexico. The title *La Perdida* is clearly pointing out the author’s narrative strategy.

So when Abel turns to stereotypical icons like “chiquita” or a United States national imitating Kerouac she does so in purpose and with a great sense of criticism. Nevertheless, as it will also be demonstrated further on, but was briefly illustrated with the example of the word “burro,” there are multiple subconscious signs revealing that, in spite of Abel’s deep immersion into Mexico City life and culture, it is impossible for her not to represent Mexicanity using an archetypical approach.

1.1.3. Marcos and the Never-Ending Latin American Revolution

Moving to the second example, in *La pipa de Marcos* (2004) the Spanish illustrator and writer Javier De Isusi is more interested in rural Mexico and the story is settled in the country's southern border with Guatemala.

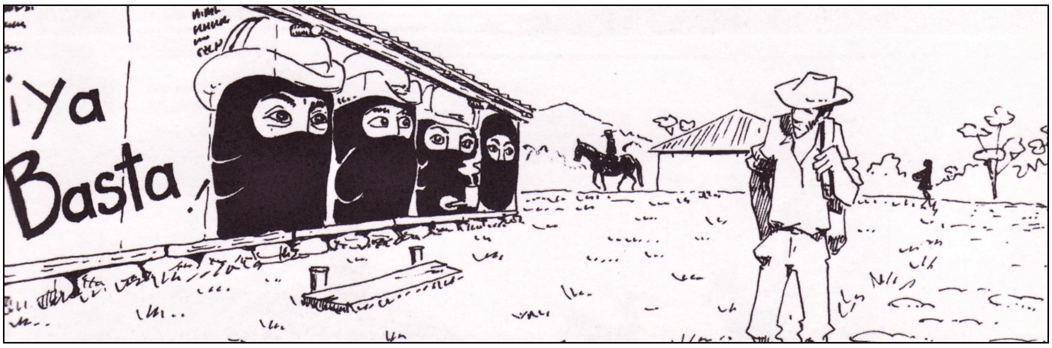


Figure 15. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 105).

Figure 15 depicts a countryside scene: it is an open space with low buildings surrounded by vegetation, there is a mountain in the back, a man riding a horse and a female figure carrying what looks like a hamper. The character in the front is looking out of the corner of his eye at the inscription "¡Ya basta!" ("Enough!"), written next to the figures of four faces covered by balaclavas; the first three are men as they appear to be wearing very similar sombreros to the one the character has got on, the fourth face represents a woman. All of these icons introduce in the narrative a Mexican ideology, that of the EZLN, acronym in Spanish for Zapatista Army of National Liberation. In addition, because these icons are presented as painted on a wall, this is also a statement, a demonstration of an imperative ideology. The gaze of the man portrayed with a pipe (the third from the left) seems to be meeting that of the reader, whereas the other three scrutinize the passer by who gives them a shy sidelong glance.

The EZLN is, in a few words, an armed movement founded in 1983 and made public in 1994 by a rebellious group located in the south eastern State of Chiapas, it opposes neoliberals and defends the indigenous people's right to follow an order and legal regulations according to their particular needs and not to those imposed by the government, the army and the police. The movement is named after Emiliano Zapata, one of the leaders that fought to bring down Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in the 1910 Mexican Revolution. EZLN's main spokesman is Sub-Commandant Marcos, whose only distinctive feature in the picture above is his pipe. Marcos calls himself "sub" because, according to his proposal, the people should always be first in charge. For the same reason, members of this movement always wear balaclavas or bandanas covering their faces to emphasize the supremacy of collectiveness over individuality.

Marcos is not only following Zapata's ideals but he is also replicating the General's visual impact. Marco's iconic self-depiction echoes the effect Zapata had a hundred years ago, he was in fact one of the most photographed rebel leaders of its time. The image shown below is one of his best-known pictures taken in 1914 by a famous photographer of its time, H. J. Gutiérrez. In this period Zapata's image had become so popular that he willingly booked a private photo shoot in Gutiérrez's studio located at Mexico City's Historic Centre. (Guevara 2009).

Figure 21. Guevara Escobar, Arturo (2009) "Revolución. Cambio e imagen." (Accessed 4 May 2012 http://fotografosdelarevolucion.blogspot.co.uk/).

In opposition to Dictator Porfirio Díaz, who was usually portrayed wearing a military uniform and was well-known for his predilection for refined French aesthetics, Zapata embodied a "charro" (horseman) wearing a distinctive sombrero; he was a peasant fluent in Nahuatl whose home was the countryside and whose goals and ideals were mainly agrarian. The picture above was taken five years before his assassination in 1919 and his image has transcended as an icon of a brave countryman fighting for social justice and defending revolutionary ideals. A relevant case involving the figure of Emiliano Zapata is described on the section entitled "Iconic Replacement."

As the title of this section anticipates, Latin America has built a great part of its contemporary history under the icons of the revolution. Therefore, in addition to Zapata, another relatable and very noticeable example of a displaced revolutionary icon is that of Che Guevara. It is, by the way, not completely unusual to find a portrait of his sidekick, and long-bearded, Camilo Cienfuegos, taken to be Che; so it seems that, when there is a certain degree of incompetence on behalf of the reader, the strongest icon tends to replace other relatable images or names. In 1960 photographer Alberto Korda took Che Guevara's portrait, entitled Guerrillero Heroico; seven years after Che was killed in Bolivia, the image began being endlessly reproduced, it was first published in magazines such as *Stern* or *Paris Match* and countless objects. Interestingly, Korda never accepted royalties for the exploitation of this image, "he was sensitive about its inappropriate commercialisation. In 2000 he won an out-of-court settlement from the advertising agency of Smirnoff vodka, which he donated to a children's hospital in Cuba" (*History Ireland* 2008, 52). So Korda was the first one to identify that Che's image was an icon that had been displaced from its original register and he did what he could to at least avoid contributing towards its further decontextualization.

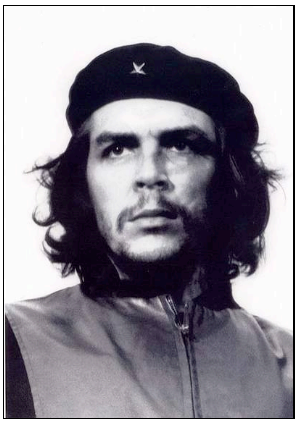


Figure 22. El País (2007) “El Che antes del Che” (Accessed 4 May 2012 http://elpais.com/elpais/2007/10/09/actualidad/1191917828_850215.html).

Just like Zapata, Che was killed young and in the peak of his enormous popularity, so his image as a young and rebel idealist accentuated by his messy hair and his gaze fixed at the horizon made him immortal. Unlike Zapata, Che was a very well cultivated man, both as a scientist and humanist; he was an avid reader and writer who travelled intensively around the world. Such characteristics are introduced into this portrait thanks to one single element: his beret with the Communist star; in the same way, Zapata’s agrarian ideals are brought into the picture thanks to his revolutionary sombrero. Most of the authors studied in this thesis make reference to Che:

Figure 23. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 18).

Figure 24. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 137).

Figure 25. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 29).

What all of these examples have in common is that they all make reference to several different uses given to the reproduction of the icon — and not to the icon itself. De Isusi presents Vasco, the main character, visiting a friend who has a poster with Che's famous quote: "Hasta la victoria siempre" [Always toward victory] written on it, whereas Kuper shows a collage of street art produced by different creative groups protesting against the governor Ulises Ruíz, and another one of his famous phrases: "Patria o muerte" [Homeland or death] is quoted too. All of the authors agree to play with the discourses embedded in the collective imaginary.

Lastly, Abel illustrates a market where there is a variety of options for people to choose from a t-shirt bearing a hammer and a sickle, to the one with Che's face and name on it or a third one with the representation of Marcos and his phrase "Ya basta" [Enough] —as previously seen in De Isusi's work. There is an interesting contrast between the character of Memo, who describes Carla in English saying "it's the 'student' of México" and later continues talking in Spanish. For someone studying Mexico it should be noted that she is the one being analyzed by the rest of the characters; all of their gazes are on her and on her fashion style composed of Mexican icons such as artisanal clothes and a braid, therefore she responds timidly shaking her hand and feeling self-conscious and alienated. By situating a foreigner wearing Mexican iconic items, instead of casual t-shirts Abel is portraying Carla's otherness and creating a frontier thousands and thousands of kilometres away from the actual political border with this young woman's native country.

The reason why Che's icon is still very present in all of these pages is because his representation evokes ideas of social justice, patriotism and resistance, which are very compatible with all the political problems these comic book authors have found in Mexico. It should also be added that Marcos deliberately embodies the legacy of both Che and Zapata. Like Che, Marcos is an educated man with a university degree, an eloquent speaker and writer. Like Zapata, he lives in the countryside and fights for the rights of the peasants. But he is not only the sum of these two, he is also an augmented, revised and updated version of the Latin American guerrilla and this can also be verified in his image by one single feature: his balaclava.

Now, in order to show how political the single panel taken from De Isusi's book is and the very complex world it is alluding to, I find it relevant to point out the fact that the idea of an anti-establishment movement with people masking their individual identity is deeply rooted in the history of culture and goes way beyond 20th century revolutions. It can be related to what Bakhtin describes as the "carnivalesque crowd." According to Bakhtin, the carnival enables a freedom to look at the world with different eyes (1984, 273) and he uses the example of the "feast of fools" that took place in medieval times in Europe when common people belonging to subordinated classes mocked the clergy, and other authorities, by playing their roles:

> The defenders of this feast understood it as a gay and free expression of "our second nature" in which gay folly was opposed to "piousness and fear of God." Thus the champions of the festival considered it a "once-a-year" liberation, not only from routine but also from the religious outlook. It permitted the people to see the world with "foolish eyes," and this right belonged not to the "feast of fools" alone but to every feast in its popular marketplace aspect. (1984, 260).

It is also worth mentioning that in Mesoamerican cultures, several ritual dances were performed wearing masks in order to impersonate gods and sacred forces, in addition, funeral rites included masking noble people so that they could make their way to the afterlife with a face full of expression and not that of their dead body. Again, the idea of wearing a mask is related to being in another nature different from that of ordinary life. And this order of things where the sacred joins the divine was to a great extent made possible thanks to artistic creation. As Miguel León Portilla points out, in the pre-Hispanic world, the connexion between outer appearance and spirituality was highly cultivated:

> If the good artist is master of himself and possesses a face and a heart, he will be able to achieve what is the proper end of art: 'to humanize the desires of the people,' that is, to help others to understand things human and divine, and to behave in a truly human way. (1980, 210).

So there is a behavioural pattern, inherent to humanity and verifiable in multiple cultures and in different periods of history, that follows the transformation of the external appearance in order to change the ordinary course of life. This is why it doesn't seem so strange that several anti-establishment contemporary actions such as EZLN, or the Occupy movement, *Wikileaks* or *Anonymous*, have adopted similar patterns and codes by favouring anonymity and choosing to disguise the individual faces with a mask or cover that reinforces their collectiveness.

In addition, the carnivalesque crowd from medieval times and the pre-Hispanic people, they both have documented such patterns of behaviour by using sequential art narratives. As it was previously mentioned in this research, if we take into account the somewhat problematic broad definition of comics by McCloud, we understand why he is not hesitant to affirm that narrative forms as old as pre-Columbian codices produced by the Aztecs are arguably the first comics in human history, he quotes the example of a picture manuscript created before the Spanish Conquest in 1521 that narrates the story of a political hero and he shows an example of how can it be decoded:

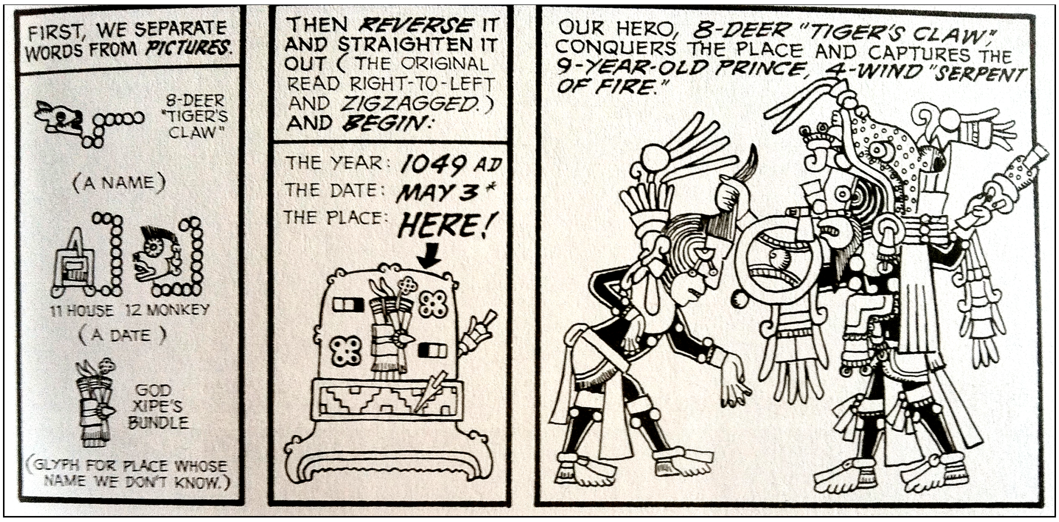


Figure 26. McCloud, Scott (1994) *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 11).

To discuss if this type of work should or should not be called comics is not the aim of my study. However, it its very relevant to emphasize that I agree with McCloud that in the codices there is, without a doubt, a sequence of juxtaposed pictures arranged in a deliberated order with the purpose of telling a story. So to me it is not that important to discuss if these ancient creations were comics or not as it is to pinpoint that they preserved precious information in a sequential narrative format filled with icons that have turned into major references of Mexican identity. Relating historical facts that have occurred in Mexican territory in a visual narrative has been present since pre-Hispanic times and this iconicity is still influencing contemporary comics created in or inspired by Mexican culture as can be seen in the following example taken from *Diario de Oaxaca*:

Figure 27. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 190).

Peter Kuper represents snapshots of life in the streets in contemporary Mexico where a textile artisan whose works shows patterns influenced by pre-Columbian cultures and a street dancer working in tourist spots and emulating ancient Mexican rituals.

It is also worth to mention that the Catholic religion has been highly influential in the iconic depiction of Mexico. A very similar process to that of the screenfold quoted by McCloud has occurred with iconic murals in Catholic churches dating as far back as the early middle ages: there is a sequential narration of pictures that tells a story or communicates an encoded message and such message, even inside the church, might be an irreverent one. In order to illustrate so I find it relevant to quote an example mentioned by Dario Fo in his play *The Comic Mysteries* (1969) where he also makes reference to the “feast of fools” and other European celebrations of this sort. Fo shows the following image taken from a mosaic found in the church of Sant’Ambrogio in Milan:

Figure 28. Fo, Dario (1988) *Mistero Buffo* (Translated by Stuart Hood and Ed Emery. London: Methuen Drama, 27).

Fo remarks that the most relevant detail of this work is to be found in the gestures of these figures:

> Even I, when I was an architecture student and had to go and work on this mosaic, never noticed this amazing bit. These figures represent two *jongleurs*, two *jongleurs* dressed as *milites*, as you can see from the theatrical nature of their gestures.
>
> The *milites* found themselves in the popular firing line fairly frequently, because they were particularly hated by the people. Basically, the *milites* consisted of those professional

> agents of law and order whom today we know as the police. With a bit of imagination, you can remove their medieval dress and re-dress them in modern clothes, and you will see how well their faces fit the part. (1988, 27).

In Fo's description it is clearly illustrated that the individual identity of these two persons is hidden but their pronounced theatrical gestures that made them part of a collective manifestation are not. This mosaic represents a deliberated and successful initiative to place an immovable iconic message inside the church that readers back then were competent enough to decode. And, just like Che Guevara's portrait in a commercial vodka bottle is a juxtaposition of two contradictory ideas, Fo's example is also illustrating an iconic image displaced into a context where it creates conflict between two opposite discourses: fear of God and irreverence.

It is therefore made evident that the message within a space which becomes part of the message. And, as I mentioned, in the case of De Isusi's panel previously shown, is not only that the author has chosen to represent icons of an anti-establishment movement but also how these icons are depicted on a wall.

And, going back to Abel's example, just like there is a tendency to present a synecdoche such as the entire Latin America represented by a fruit bowl or the entire Mexico represented by a sombrero, there is also a tendency to juxtapose Che's cigar and Marco's pipe but, more than that, to juxtapose Che, Marcos and Zapata's portraits with the idea of "Revolución." Is not only the people's collective imaginary that makes this possible but this is also the target of Marcos' conscious self-depiction. And De Isusi is also very aware of these overlapping discourses. As Juri Lotman asserts:

> Since only something which has an antithesis can act as a sign, any compositional device becomes semantically distinctive once it is juxtaposed with a contrasting system. When a whole text is sustained in a single dimension, we are not aware of that dimension at all, as, for instance, in epic narrative. What Pushkin referred to as the "rapid transitions" of Romantic tales only acquire meaning when combined with passages of leisurely narration. In the same way "point of view" is an element of literary structure which we become aware of as soon as there is a possibility of

> witching it in the course of the narrative (or of projecting the text onto another text with a different point of view) (1975, 339).

In all of the comics analyzed in this research, those “rapid transitions” coming from their multidimensionality can be clearly seen. As I have pointed out before, this is due to the fact that there are a number of contrasting systems juxtaposed in these books. One of these contrasts is shown through the authors’ point of view as foreignness. The next section elaborates on this aspect.

1.2. Contemporary Comics and the Collective Perception of Mexico

As I have stated before, authors are greatly influenced by a number of contrasting realities within Mexico. In these scenarios it tends to become obvious what Monsiváis identifies as a national culture greatly driven by political interests. And, thanks to the presence of permeable boundaries, these narratives are also greatly influenced by foreign politics too. So that the notions of identity and culture taking shape within all of these comic books is not neutral but a product of numerous external factors that have created a collective perception not only of Mexico but also of how Mexican issues such as insecurity, migration and gender violence should be addressed and how to turn them into innovative comic books.

Taking into account the temporary location in which these books were conceived and drafted, I find it important to briefly mention some general aspects and events on the Mexican socio-political scene that are directly related to the issues addressed in these comics. For example, 1994, the year that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered force. This event is key in order to understand the upraising, also in the same year, of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) represented in *La pipa de Marcos*.

In addition, both, criminal activity and population growth in the metropolitan area began to dramatically increase in Ciudad Juarez after the rise of maquiladoras (manufactures) derived from the establishment of the NAFTA. This factor attracted both international trade and many young women and their families in search of better job opportunities. Usually, the victims of torture and murder in Juarez were young women between 15 and 25 years old, who came from poor families and who had left school to start work early. This case was what inspired the authors of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* to create a comic book based on the people who currently live and “dream” in this violent city.

Other ongoing conflicts in the country that have been increasing in the past twenty years, such as massive illegal migration to the United States as illustrated in *Life Sucks* or organized crime and governmental repression, as addressed in *La Perdida* and *Diario de Oaxaca* respectively, are issues that have turned into international markers of Mexico.

These compounds of conflicts massively covered by the international media are in great measure what have enabled numerous foreign authors in Europe and the United States to become interested in Mexican current political issues: “It is an inherited colonial attitude, a fearlessness that comes from belonging to an empowered context” (Priego 2011, n.p.). In addition it has proved to be very profitable for publishers to promote this type of editorial product that sells relevant contemporary conflicts in an innovative art form such as the comic book documentary, historical novel or autobiography:

> There is a gap in the market for this kind of narratives and developing countries offer this in a fantastic way because people can read these books in a safer context but feeling that they are finding out about a different reality and feel responsible for learning things that are not Walt Disney. But I do find this to be somewhat opportunistic. (Priego 2011, n.p.).

Having stated all this, it is crucial to take into account that the author’s interests in certain conflicts is in many cases propelled by external political factors that inevitably influence the notions of cultural and artistic value within the comics creative industry: “culture industries can, therefore, make a significant contribution to the (re)production and perpetuation of the *idea* of Canada, the *idea* of France, the *idea* of Europe.” (Goff 2000, 537).

1.3. Representing Mexico: Craving and Aversion

I argue that there are very visible tendencies to portray both “conflict”, as has been mentioned before when I referred to the different political situations addressed by the authors, and “desire” which has to do with main cultural icons that all these authors share and constantly look for. So I would argue that there are two main discursive levels in each one of these works: one is the appreciation for what the authors identify as Mexican culture, and the other is a strong criticism on the politics and social disparities that accompany this newly discovered realities. In these sections I will exemplify such tendencies and cover briefly key socio-political issues involved in this type of representations.

1.3.1. Craving Kahlo

The fact that all of the authors studied in this thesis have singled out the topic of Mexicanity in order to include it in a comic book is in itself a statement. There is a visible interest in exploring the culture and documenting the national traditions and costumes. In spite of their very different styles, their art tends to present carefully detailed natural landscapes as well as the architectonic legacy of the places they visit.

Some of the main cultural icons that they all have in common and explore in one way or another are as varied as “Lucha libre” archaeological sites, or, as the following examples illustrate, the also iconic national figure of Frida Kahlo, “that most autobiographical of painters (only Van Gogh and Rembrandt come to mind as her competitors when it comes to the self-portrait).” (Nericcio 2007, 199).

A very recurrent case for illustrating “craving” of Mexican culture is the allusion, in the most varied ways, to painter Frida Kahlo. Most of the main works analyzed in this dissertation make reference to this artist. From Peter Kuper’s Day of the Dead caricaturesque representation:

Figure 29. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 77).

To Abel's character, who, among many other mentions of the painter, as it shows in the following panel she recalls one of Frida's famous self-portraits as part of her lost object of desire, her lost sense of belonging, her ruined and precious place of origin:

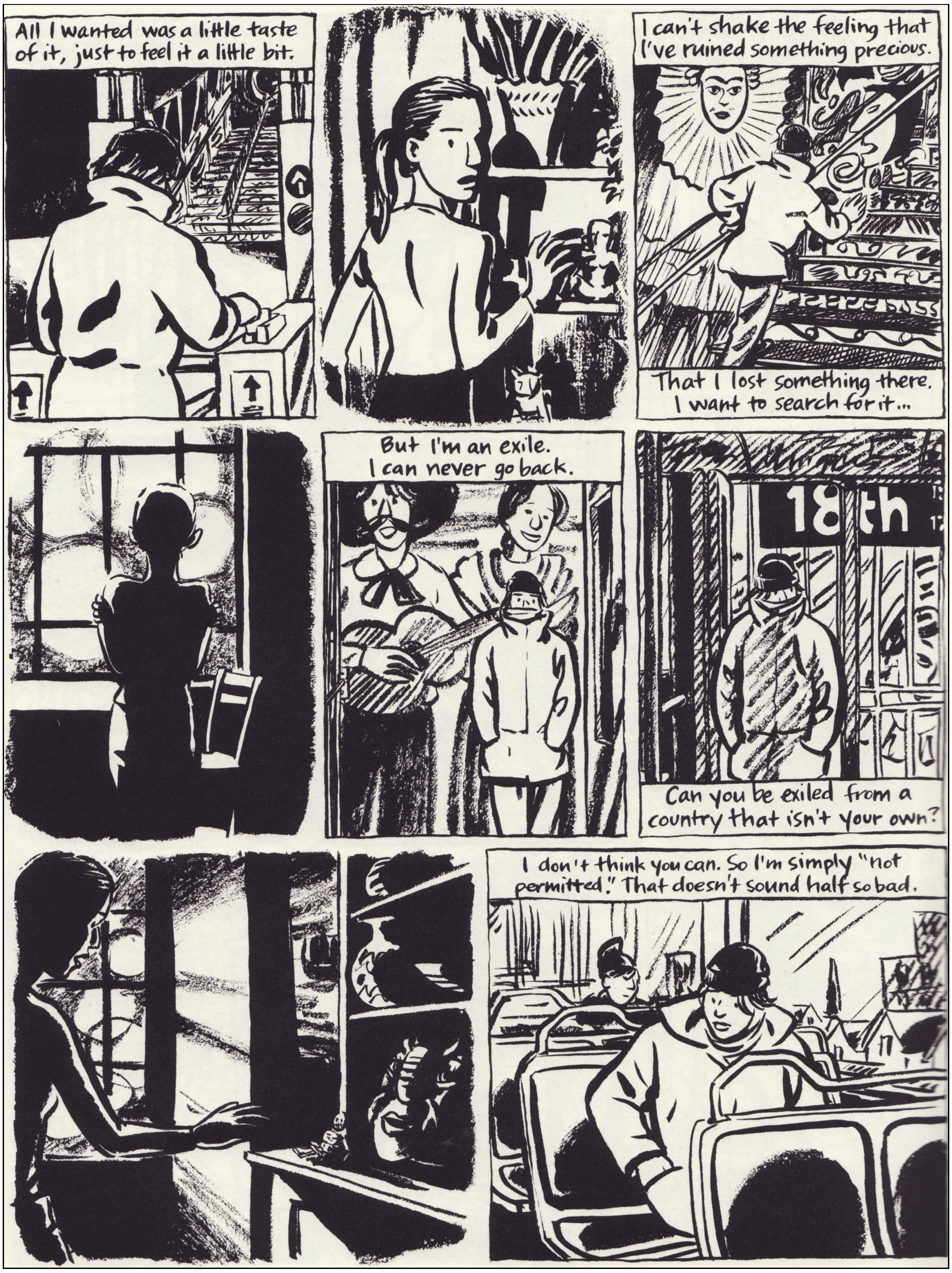


Figure 30. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 8).

To Baudoin and Troub's, who borrowed the title of Frida's watermelons painting to allude to women who are alive —and dare to dream in a dangerous environment? The authors establish a subtle analogy between the both colourful and tormented art of Kahlo to the hopes and dreams of young women living under threat:

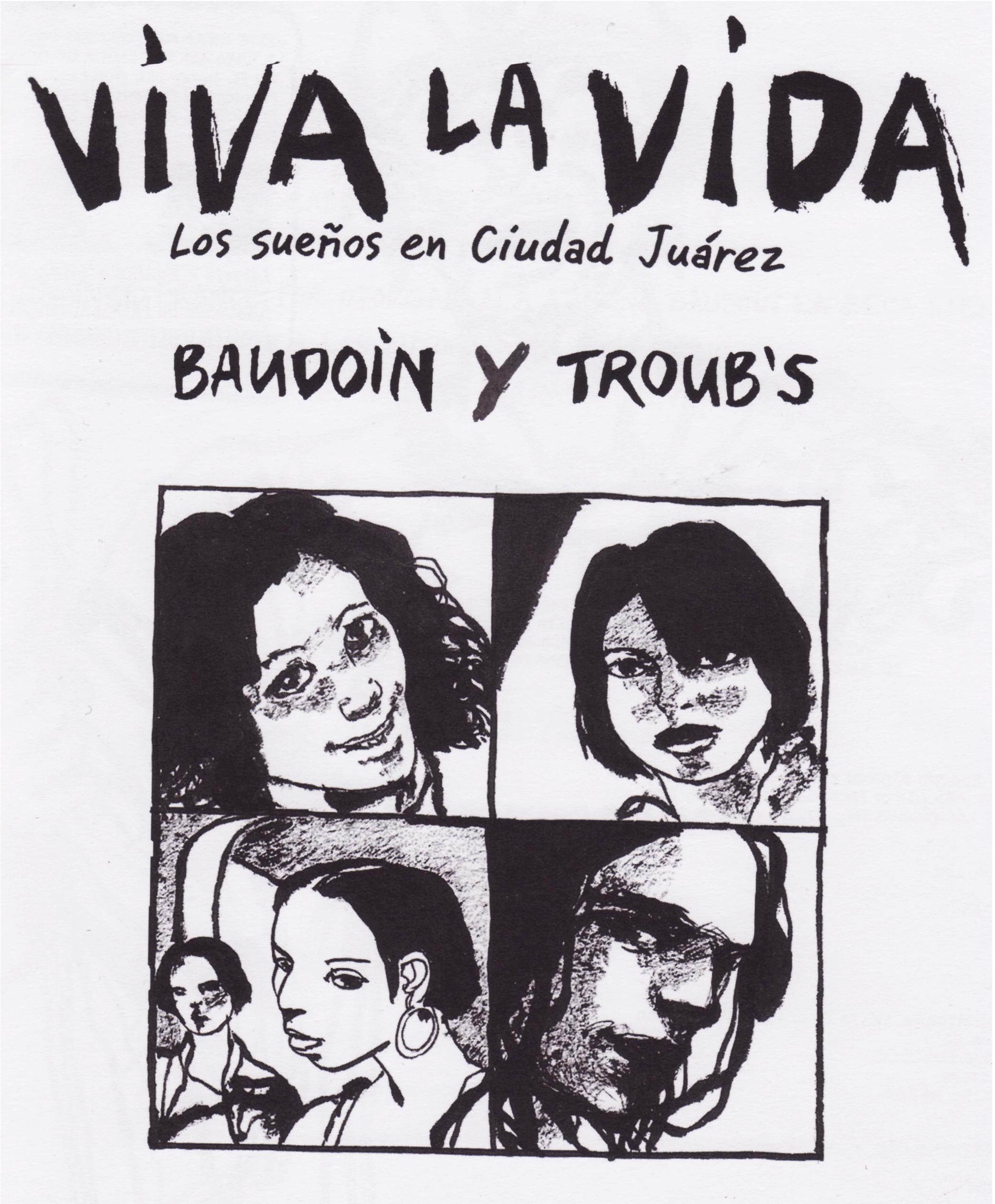


Figure 31. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 1).

In addition, something related to all of these examples is that one of the most notorious cases of Frida Kahlo taken to the art of comics was created by Gilbert Hernandez who produced a graphic biography of the artist: "Of the flow of Mexican art onto and into the works of Mexican American artisans, there exists no better microcosm of the process of exchange than "Frida" (1988)." (Nericcio 2007, 200)

This process of exchange is, as Nericcio points out, clearly visible in the following panel alluding to Kahlo's birth. There is an allusion to one of her most celebrated paintings from 1937 “Mi nodriza y yo” [My Nurse and I]:

Figure 32. Hernandez, Gilbert (1991) “Frida” in *Love and Rockets Vol. 1* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 13).

All throughout Kahlo’s biography, Hernandez alludes to some of her paintings in order to both, allow the artists’ representation of a particular segment of her life to speak, but he also intervenes them in order to demonstrate a conscious dialogue with those paintings. The example above clearly illustrates that Hernandez has made a careful selection of Frida’s original painting. The wet-nurse’s face covered by a pre-Columbian mask has been cut off, or better said, replaced by the iconic sequence of a text-box with Kahlo’s parents names on it. What has been emphasized are the wet-nurse breasts and Kahlo’s depiction as an infant with an adult face.

In addition Gilbert's black and white reinterpretation of Kahlo's multi-coloured paintings lead to a completely different possibility of contrasting elements: in this case there is no green foliage, no blue sky, no different skin tones. The flowers in one breast and the drops of milk in the other are sufficient elements for Hernandez to state that, for Frida Kahlo as painter, the constant observation of the strong contrasts inherent to her place of birth was always her primary source of nourishment.

It is very likely that one of the many influences that some of these authors, as contemporary comics authors, have got from Gilbert and his brother Jaime is not only their personal way to represent Kahlo and Mexican art but also their propagated immersion into Mexicanity seen as the culture of origin of their preceding generation. That is exactly what the character of Carla is searching for when she travels to Mexico and that is why she describes a feeling of "loosing something there." There is a strong sense of search visible in all of these authors in spite of their own cultural and ethnic background. I would also attribute this to the fact that Mexico has been seen, since pre-Columbian times, as a land where everyone from indigenous people to Spanish explorers or *criollos* [creoles] and *mestizos* [mixed race] as well as artists, writers and intellectuals or migrants from Central and South America need to search for something:

> As a nation that has historically sent people across the border but only recently and reluctantly come to view itself as a place of transit and destination, Mexico faces a backlog of social, economic, political, and cultural issues stemming from this skewed understanding of its role in the making of the continent's population movements. (Ruiz 2006, 47).

Thus, Mexico is not only a place of constant transition and movement as it is explained on the section "Migration: Mexico's Contemporary Cultural Icon"; it has been regarded historically as a place where artists, writers, mystics and healers can go in search for something or stay while in transit to a final destination. Examples of this related to Frida Kahlo and her context and legacy are endless such as Antonin Artaud visiting the Tarahumara people in 1936, or André Breton stating that Mexico is "a naturally surrealist" country, or the British painter Leonora

Carrignton moving to the country permanently and the Spaniard Remedios Varo doing exactly the same. The recent wave of interest in the Mayan theory on the "ages of the world" as written in the *Popol Vuh* is just an example of a certain aspect of the country's international reputation.

In an interview Peter Kuper conceded to me, he described his awareness and the decisions he needed to make in order to negotiate with the tensions created by these two levels while working on *Diario de Oaxaca*:

> I am always looking for different ways to tell new stories and to respond to what's happening in the world and I certainly do not always want to draw screaming hard images. Actually, when I was living in Mexico I found lots more colour and a lot more beautiful ways to show things, even if I was drawing PFP tanks. There always would be trees in the background, somebody playing a horn or something that was part of the ongoing life and something "contra los problemas" [against trouble]. So I am rethinking always what is the best way to talk about what is happening. But I feel pressure to describe what I see because otherwise I feel like Nero fiddling while Rome is burning. These things keep on presenting themselves and there's bad weather all the time, and more storms and hotter summers, and it is impossible not to look at that and wonder what is going on in the world and try to include that in what I am drawing. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

As I have mentioned before, when talking about the case of Abel's *La Perdida* in the section called Cultural Iconic Sequences in Comics, the author is completely aware of the fact that she is constructing a clueless character. Likewise, in the quote above, Kuper describes his strategy to remain in command of the two polarities of craving and aversion introduced in *Diario de Oaxaca*. And, as I have also stated in previous pages, Kuper and Abel are as "impartial" as they are culturally able to but they both show an awareness that brings a deeper level of competence to their works. I will elaborate on the importance of such aspect in the following section.

1.3.2. Appointing Aversion

In addition to the NAFTA and its impact on culture, it is also worth of mentioning a succession of key events that would help to identify different Mexican political boundaries that have had a strong presence during the period where these comics have been published. The constraints of these boundaries are what tend to give origin to cultural icons and these are usually icons of aversion.

In 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), well known for its coercion and corruption, was voted out after 71 years in power. The National Action Party (PAN) held presidency for the following 12 years; however, in July 2006, it was very close to lose the election over the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in a socio-political context which, as Alejandro Álvarez Béjar asserts in his essay *The Rise of Populism and the End of Neoliberalism*, was particularly complex since Mexico was:

> As Mexico approaches its 2006 elections, it is simultaneously experiencing the exhaustion of its neoliberal economic model and a political crisis in which the presidency lacks its historical sources of support, the legislature's power has been limited by the Supreme Court, and the court itself is increasingly discredited. The system of political parties is also in array, with deepening divisions between parties, among the leaders within each party, and in the Insitituto Federal Electoral itself. Motivated by these circumstances, as well as by high unemployment, low wages, and privatization of strategic public enterprises an emerging social force both urban and rural, has begun to seek electoral outlets for its growing dissatisfaction with neoliberalism. The result is a transitional election combining concerns for public security with variants of populism from the right and the left aimed at the political reformulation of neoliberalism. (17, 2006).

In contrast, in the last presidential election held in July 2012, the PRI won and the PRD appeared to be the second most voted party showing a revealing decrease in preference for the PAN. This was largely because of the escalation of a drug war that resulted in over 50, 000 deaths of innocent people between 2006 and 2012. Nevertheless, the PRI's victory was not a clean one, student movements and activists' protests against media manipulation also marked the 2012 electoral campaign given the fact that the two media outlets in the country have always shown a strong opposition to leftist candidates and a deliberate preference for the PRI; in addition, thousands of cases of bribery and irregularities were denounced in the day of the election. And all of this has been aggravated by the profound economic failure experienced globally since 2008. In other words: the comics analyzed in my review are documenting turbulent times in every single aspect of Mexican contemporary reality that translate into inconsistent politics, impunity, a divided country where all sorts of social tensions coexist, which include: governmental oppression –as seen in the clashes between police and the teacher's syndicate in Kuper's *Diario de Oaxaca*–, indigenous communities living in resistance —as illustrated in the Zapatist zone recreated in *La pipa de Marcos*— criminal misogyny —as reflected in the historic record of the femicides of Juarez addressed in *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*—, social resentment —as represented in the criminal gang that appears in *La Perdida*— and massive migration to the United States —as illustrated by the migrants of Mexican origin in *Life Sucks*.

The following example draws on Mexico's political turmoil of the past 12 years addressed by the authors of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*. I argue that to understand Ciudad Juarez it is imperative to avoid manicheism. The authors oscillate constantly from Ciudad Juarez portrayed as a world filled with butterflies that guide the path of a goat, Baudoin, and a turtle, Troub's, so that they have nothing to fear in their mission as dream catchers to a monstrous laboratory where all sorts of experiments are being carried out in the name of evil forces:

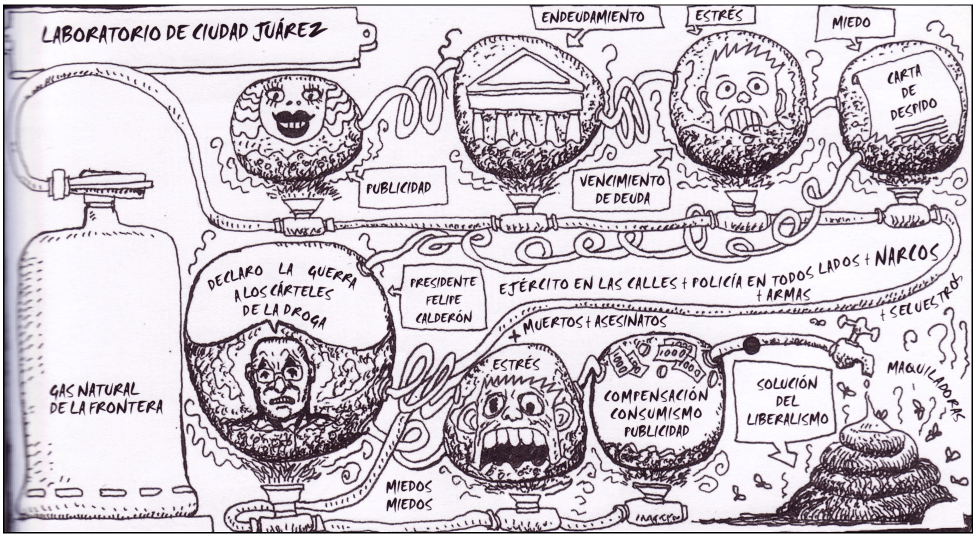


Figure 33. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 115).

I asked Baudoin if his expectations of Juarez matched what he had found there and he responded:

> When we travelled from Mexico City to Juarez, people were really afraid to let us go and asked us to be ultra-careful and gave us lots of warnings. Therefore, when we finally got there, it was surprising for us not to find anything extraordinary. We were half-expecting to feel as if we were entering into another world. It is much simpler than people usually imagine because life goes on there. The heart still beats, people are still feeling hungry everyday or you can see the girls and boys carrying on with their lives and demonstrating that life goes on! So there is not much difference from Mexico City. Yes, you do hear the sounds of the police sirens a little more often and, yes you find army vehicles patrolling around more frequently but there's really nothing more than that. (Baudoin, 2011 n.p.).

I think that what the author is describing here is a transition from this apocalyptic notion of Juarez — not far from that of the vampire-clown of *30 Days of Night: Juarez* (2009) a comic book by Matt Fraction and Ben Templesmith that depicts the city as an infernal scenery that smells like "tortilla and dead girl" (2009, 5) — to a more realistic appreciation of the city. It is likely that, if the authors had remained there for a longer period, they would have come to a better understanding of the city with a more balanced view of things. Juarez is not apocalyptic. It is not a fairyland either, as it is elaborated on the section titled “The “Superchild” in Ciudad Juarez.” Nevertheless, the fact that the sirens are heard a little more often than in the rest of the country is because murders take place a little more often too.

On the other hand, as it was stated on the previous section, “Surrealism and magic realism” is what many French and other European visitors are predisposed to encounter in Mexico. As it has been pointed out, this book is in fact named after an artist linked to the surrealist movement, Frida Kahlo. This is a useful indication in order to deconstruct the authors’ pre-established notion of Mexico and Mexicanity. They are addressing a contemporary conflict and offering a somewhat hopeful reading of it by finding shelter on the painting “Viva la vida”, from 1954, which portrays watermelons and has turned into a classic “souvenir” of Mexico. The green, white and red colours of the fruit evoke those of the Mexican flag; if there was one thing that Kahlo made with her entire work it was a statement of Mexicanity. I find this problematic because it suggests that the authors have redeemed a contemporary icon of violence and aversion by juxtaposing a celebratory icon of craving.

Furthermore, what denotes their condition of temporal visitors in the country is their lack of ability to represent a normal day in Mexico City, which, for millions of people, is likely to be free from tortillas, dead girls and enchantment. In other words, being in Mexico could, in many ways, resemble the reality they come from but the fact that they are not able to make these connections is what distances them from truly embracing the world that they are seeing. Even before reaching Ciudad Juarez, what they see in the country’s capital is touched by what their prefigured notion of the northern city allows them to see; and, as García Canclini pinpoints:

> It is precisely the fact of having lived through an intense experience that obscures the unconscious forces motivating people’s actions, which in turn motivates people to edit facts in order to construct a personally advantageous version of the truth. An uncritical study of the fragmentation of a city and its discourse tends to fall into two traps, either reproducing urban fragmentation in monographs while failing to explain it or pretending that urban fragmentation can be “sutured” by choosing the “explanation” given by the weakest informants. The methodological populism of

> anthropology thus becomes the “scientific” ally of political populism. (1995, 744).

The authors insist on the fact that their book is not political nonetheless; they constantly state a clearly politicized posture on a number of different topics. The following quote is a relevant example: “Los mexicanos son bastante pesimistas sobre todo después de las elecciones presidenciales fraudulentas de 2006. Ya que, a pesar de las manifestaciones populares sin precedentes desde la revolución, Felipe Calderón se hizo con el poder y todavía hoy lo ostenta…” (2011, 45) [Mexicans are quite pessimistic especially after the fraudulent presidential elections of 2006. In spite of the demonstrations without precedents since the revolution, Felipe Calderon took power and he still holds it].

Peter Kuper, for example, makes reference to the many protests he encounters showing more awareness of his fragmented perspective:

Figure 34. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 74).

Kuper doesn’t refrain himself from addressing the unaccomplished promises of the current president, a poster from his election campaign lies on the street and a fierce street dog looks at the unaccomplished promise “vivir mejor.” In the upper left side of the wall appears written the acronym APPO which stands for The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, a set of social organizations that were unified after an attempt to evict protesting teachers by the state government in Oaxaca. It was formed in

June 2006 when Kuper was living there. It can also be read a graffiti inscription that says “fuera ratas” [go away, rats] as well as an iconic reproduction of different faces of Ulises Ruíz ironically depicted as “innocent” or “murder” or “guilty.” A woman dressed in artisanal “Tehuana” clothes walks towards the end of the street represented by a realistic photograph that contrasts with the drawn scene on her back which clearly points out the artist’s interpretation and subjectivity. He is introducing his own perspective as well as the multiple colours and discourses of the city. Kuper is incredibly critical but also very much aware of his perspective. So the book demonstrates awareness of its own political point of view. In addition, Kuper is equally critical about President Bush, about the current governor in Oaxaca who belongs to a different party than that of the Mexican president, and, even when his book does present broad comments and generalizations about Mexican people, the author is very much aware of his condition as a foreigner and he allows a wider blank for the reader to fulfil. In most of Kuper’s double spread collages there are windows for the reader to interpret.

Kuper is openly political and this clarity about his point of view permeates his entire work. In contrast, in the case of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*, the authors are referring to every single authority in the country as incompetent and portraying every civilian they bump into as idealists and dreamers, almost emulating the romanticized “noble savage” concept. It is, at the same time, a displaced and a displacing reality. These people are seen as dreamers, but there is no account of the fact that they also live in a very real world where not everything is fantasy. An alternative approach on behalf of these authors would have been to avoid describing themselves as non-political: “Un tipo me graba y me dice que lo va a colgar en el sitio del PRD pero no estamos aquí para hacer política” [A guy films me and tells me that he will upload this in PRD’s website but we are not here to get involved in politics] (Baudoin and Troub’s 2011, 28). But, more than that, their interpretation of the situation seems to suggest a solution to the chaos that they came to look at closely. In fact, I argue that the most problematic issue with this book is that chaos is mentioned but not recreated. Chaos is pinpointed but the authors rush to try to solve it with a somewhat artificial soothing confidence that everything and everyone will be fine thanks to this escapism into an oniric world where there's no pain, no confusion… no chaos. As Francisco de la Mora asserts, *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*: "It is a dangerous book. Because it is so dangerous to take an initiative like this one in a place like Juarez. I think that, in a very subtle way, the authors disrespect the recent history of the city." (De la Mora 2011, n.p.).

Respecting the history of the city is, in fact, the main difference with this comic book and the novel that served its authors as a source of inspiration, Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004). I consider that the Chilean novelist's greatest virtue is that he is able to re-construct an entropic, distorted, inapprehensive world. His fictional work is based on deep research on the femicides of Ciudad Juarez but also on his long years spent living and working in Mexico where he co-founded the "*infrarrealista*" [Infrarealism] movement in the early 1970's in opposition to the preponderant official national culture mainly lead by the poet Octavio Paz. An anti-establishment writer by nature, Bolaño is therefore never prone to offer the reader a sublimated and hurried solution to such chaos, if something is made clear in *2666* is that an easy way out cannot be the way out: "Only in chaos are we conceivable" (736)

1.4. Code-Switching: the Language as Cultural Icon

Only one of the books studied here, *La pipa de Marcos,* was originally produced entirely in Spanish, whereas *Diario de Oaxaca* was conceived from its creation as a bilingual edition. Nevertheless all of the authors' —including De Isusi's playful glimpses of distinctively Mexican expressions— shift from their mother tongue to Spanish. This operation is called code-switching and in this section I explain why it is a fundamental aspect for the construction of cultural boundaries.

A summary of what Lotman's understand as "rapid transitions" previously mentioned above is verifiable in the following panel taken from *La Perdida* where Carla, the main character, is invited to a party and ends up meeting one of his friend's relatives —an older man who likes to be surrounded by young people and a radical young man born in the United States who has been living in Mexico for a while:

Figure 35. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 96).

In the case of *La Perdida* the language strategy is rather complex —the multiple translation issues involved in the creating and editing process of this novel are reviewed in the section called Mexican Contemporary Comics: ¿Los Perdidos?. As it is shown in the panel above, there is English being said which is written between angle brackets < > (panel 1) and English which is not (panel 1 and 2). The latter is supposed to be heard as spoken English, the former is English that is replacing which is supposed to be said in Spanish; within it, some words, such as "Gringo Loco" (panel 1), have been left in their original form in Spanish because, according to the author, these are distinctively Mexican words —which is, as I pointed out previously when explaining the example of "burro" in section the section titled Latin American Iconic Archetypes very revealing of what foreigners, specifically those from the United States, find to be very distinctive of Mexican culture. There is a conscious use of such type of words and Abel includes them within a glossary that offers her own cultural remarks. With regard to the panel above, she makes two separate entries; the first one is for "gringo", which she describes as:

> **gringo/a** – The word *gringo* is known to most or all Americans, but what most do not realize is that it's not always used generically, as description; it can also carry a negative connotation, sort of a "you're just an American, what would you know?" attitude. It's not as bad as our "wetback" or something, but it can be dismissive. Some people theorize that the word *gringo* derives from the colour of American army uniforms and the resultant phrase "green go home." (2006, 264).

Whereas a more specific entry, “el Gringo Loco”, asserts: “The Crazy Gringo. In this case, as is true of many badass nicknames, the negative has a positive connotation.” (264) I also find worthy of notice that in De Isusi’s comic book some of the characters who are native from Chiapas refer to every foreigner as “gringo” regardless if they come from the United States or not. In this sense, gringo also means “otherness.”

Going back to Abel’s sequence cited above, the two men are suggesting Carla that they are planning on doing something that sounds suspicious but she is too ashamed and surprised by Gringo Loco’s aggression to be able to spot it (panel 2.) Obviously, Abel has built a reverse situation in which the characters originally from the United States are obliged to learn Spanish but they still make occasional use of words in English. This linguistic phenomenon is called code-switching and its operations, as illustrated in the above panel, are an essential part of a bilingual dialogue:

> Code-switching is a prerequisite for participation in a bilingual conversation, and increased exposure to this practice enhances a speaker’s proficiency in producing mixed language sentences with the code alteration appearing at random syntactical junctures within each sentence. (Rudin 1996, 29).

One of the inventors of this graphic resort for the representation of code-switching in comics is Gilbert Hernandez (his work and relevance in contemporary comics is explained further on), he was arguably the first author to introduce the angle brackets as Abel does in *La Perdida*:

Figure 36. Hernandez, Gilbert (2003) *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 24).

The above panels are taken from Hernandez's famous series *Heartbreak Soup Stories* published in the first volume of *Love and Rockets* (1982-1996) Greatly influenced by magical realism, as can be seen here where the characters have left their town Palomar —located somewhere, anywhere in Latin America— and got immersed into an unknown land permeated by both surreal and mundane elements. When I asked William Nericcio what he thought about code-switching in *La Perdida* he answered:

> I would say I do not think it works as well as it works in Gilbert's. Gilbert seems to understand, is like he invented a convention. In Abel's is very distracting but in Gilbert's the convention really works. It is very important to notice how we depict that people are using that language. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

I completely agree that *La Perdida*'s translations and the different uses of language distract the attention from the actual novel. Ernesto Priego explains this aspect within the extremely complex translation process involved in the creation of this novel:

> When the first issues were published, there were lots of comments of how difficult it was to understand the bilingualism in the story. So it was decided that from issue number 3 all of the characters would be presented speaking English and using the convention of <>. (Priego 2011, n.p.)

In comparison, the resort is much better used in the book by Abel, Soria and Pleece, *Life Sucks*. This graphic novel is visually cleaner and there is no need for that much text so the insertion of dialogues in "Spanish" works more accordingly to Gilbert Hernandez's convention as pointed out by Nericcio:

Figure 37. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks*. (New York: First Second, 118).

The angle brackets are not the only indicator of the fact that all this is being said in Spanish. At the basis of this dramatic situation there is also a 'Spanish speaking' cultural context visually represented through a number of icons. First of all, a worried mother dressed in her nightgown waiting for her daughter to come back home late at night. Then there is the repetition of what seems to be an ongoing discussion about daughters' proper behaviour and issues regarding ethnically mix dating (panel 1).

There is a crucifix hanging from the mother's neck; accompanying them, iconic sequences such as the reverent expression "God willing" and "you'll understand ... when you have children of your own" (panel 2) permeate into the frame a Mexican-Catholic idiosyncrasy of upbringing, family values, religion and sense of community. Blending in with those white boys doesn't sound like something the mother would approve as verifiable in how she frowns and how this upsets her daughter. In summary, code-switching doesn't only imply a swift change of language but also the juxtaposition of ideologies, systems of belief and behavioural patterns. In a comic book, the use of code-switching can be one of the most effective resorts to introduce the migrant's conflict to culturally assimilate in a new environment. In the following pages I will explain further issues related to Mexican migration.

1.5. Migration: Mexico's Contemporary Cultural Icon

Throughout this thesis I present multiple comparisons between all of these books, pointing out their coincidences and similarities as well as their discrepancies. In this section I will begin by pointing out the regional distribution, within Mexico, of the geographic scenarios that have inspired these works and on the ways in which the notion of displacement comes into play in each case.

Understanding a few key aspects of Mexico's geo-political situation is essential to stress the cultural relevance of the regions in which the authors of these books are interested. According to the report *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011*, published by the World Bank, Mexico ranks first in the list of Top Emigration Countries with 11.9 million emigrants (Ratha, Mohapatra, Silwai 2010, 2). These comics address directly several issues related to Mexico's emigrants. All of them refer to areas of the country where migration and borders affect the entire life of their population, as researcher Olivia Ruiz asserts:

> Migrations have also shaped the country's borders. The departure of large numbers of people for northern Mexico in the first part of the twentieth century, for example, spawned urban growth in the region, which was part and parcel of a maquiladora industry conceived as a form of regional and eventually national development. (2006, 47).

Two comic books covered by my research, settled in areas of the northern border with the United States, seem to confirm this issue. Broadly, on the map, these areas can be perceived in the following diagram:

Figure 38. Geographical distribution of the Mexican regions represented in the main comic books analyzed in this research.

Life Sucks takes place in Los Angeles (1) making reference to the frequent border crossing of Californian residents to the Mexican State of Baja California, and vice versa; whereas *Viva la Vida. Los Sueños en Ciudad Juárez*(2) makes reference to an equally problematic zone of the northern border, which is the one between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua.

Migration is not, however, unidirectional. The comics of my study show an evident interest in complex issues raised in Mexico's own "periphery", meaning areas of limited links with the centralised cultural and economic power, such as that of southern states like Oaxaca (3), chosen by Peter Kuper for *Diario de Oaxaca*, or Chiapas (4), located near the southern border with Guatemala, which is where the fictional story of *La pipa de Marcos* is set. It is therefore essential to take into account that:

> Mexico does not only expel people. Official silence on the matter notwithstanding, it also receives migrants, from Central America, for example, and serves as a region of transit for still others who have left their homes in other parts of Latin America as well as the rest of the world. (Ruiz 2006, 45).

As it will be explained further below in this section, Mexico's issues in the northern frontier very often begin in its Southern frontier since they are a bridge for illegal migrants from Central and South America making their way to the United States. The states of Oaxaca and Chiapas are clear examples of a contrasting reality in Mexico, these are two of the richest areas on the country in terms of cultural legacy, archaeological sites and biodiversity, but they are, at the same time among the poorest states, with a very limited ability to grow economically, obliging many of its residents to migrate to urban areas in the centre or the north of the country and, naturally, the United States too.

In addition to those two areas and migratory contexts, *La Perdida* (5) alludes to migration within urban spaces like that of foreign communities settled in Mexico City and Mexican communities abroad, pointing out at the parallelisms that exist between life in this city and the atmosphere of a Mexican neighbourhood in Chicago.

I consider that the comics I have selected clearly illustrate how these types of Mexican borders are not only equally important but are also directly linked. I would like to argue that these borders have created borderlands that follow Parker's definition: "*Borderlands* (...) are regions around or between political or cultural entities where geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic circumstances or processes may interact to create borders or frontiers" (Parker 2006, 80). These borderlands have an effect all throughout the country and, as a matter of fact, in the rest of the American Continent too. The exploration of these five different regions depicted in the comics allows us to gain a deeper comprehension on what is the interrelation between geographic and cultural boundaries as well as what is the overall impact of Mexico's internal mobilization; issues that have been "forgotten", as Ruiz has pointed out:

> Indeed, adherence to a one-sided view of Mexico has focused attention on the northern border, excluding the nation's southern boundary with Central America and the rest of Latin America from the purview of ongoing debates about migration. Even today, Mexico's politicians and experts on the subject often refer to the southern boundary as *la frontera olvidada* [the forgotten border] an allusion to its absence in discussions about human mobility and borders. (Ruiz 2006, 47).

It is therefore a core point for this research to identify the Mexican territory as a "place of transit and destination", as Ruiz calls it. I argue that displacement is in itself one of the country's most distinctive icons used by all of the comics authors studied here, and that it is in fact thanks to displacement that these comics exist. Thus, the geographical location of Mexico is what makes it possible to find frontiers not only near its political borders or within the borderlands but also all over the country. People's mobilization arise all sorts of changes in the prevailing order of things; a phenomenon of deterritorialization of individuals, groups and objects can be regarded throughout the whole country and reflected in these comics. Hence, I find necessary to pinpoint the historical context where all of these boundaries are originated, which is also the context that the authors of these comics have been observing and commenting upon.

As Claire Fox has recorded in her essay "The Portable Border: Site-Specificity, Art, and the U. S.-Mexico Frontier", an "apocalyptic" future within the cultural scene:

> In the media coverage of NAFTA debates prior to the congressional vote in November 1993, free trade proponents argued that exporting low-wage jobs to Mexico would keep Mexicans from "stealing" U.S. jobs, while protectionists simply wanted to dig trenches and build walls to keep Mexicans out. From the point of view of Gómez-Peña and the Bordertown writers, culture and immigration are closely related, since the flow of media and people is largely responsible for the diffusion of culture. Gómez-Peña's recent call for a 'Free Art Agreement' seems to challenge the fact that cultural issues were downplayed during the NAFTA debates and that cultural industries were given cursory mention in the treaty itself. All of this has taken place against the backdrop of an ongoing drive throughout the continent to privatize cultural industries, which is bound to have its most profound effects on smaller arts organizations, the very ones most likely to promote the work of minority populations. (1994, 74).

The comics analyzed in this thesis show in great measure what is the type of Mexican culture that has been created and propagated thanks to migration. The existence of these comics is in many ways a consequence of the current cultural industry. I do not think any of these books is a marginal or peripheral narrative, quite the opposite, each one of them has found a niche created specifically for such type of cultural manifestation. In the following chapter I will analyze specific cultural issues found in each one of these comic books.

CHAPTER 2:

Mexican Iconic Displacement

The overall aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the active use of Mexican Cultural Icons in contemporary comic books and to illustrate the many forms of Iconic Displacement and, in some cases, Iconic Replacement visible in narratives involving the topic of Mexicanity. In the previous chapter I have explained a series of contextual issues related to Mexican culture and the comic book industry that have permeated the works analysed in this thesis. The first section of this current chapter discusses the inclusion of Mexican Cultural Icons within graphic novels and comics of the past 50 years pointing out that their presence is not rare or casual but, on the contrary, it has been explored for a long time. Scott McCloud and Paul Gravett have included, for example, the Mexican-American Hernandez Brothers' comics as part of the "masterworks" (Gravett 12) that have transformed the contemporary comics scene. In spite the fact that there has been a notable silence in the production of comics by Mexican authors in the past decades, it is important to situate the evolution of Mexican comics within the international context and the importance of some current authors such as José Ignacio Solórzano "Jis" or José Trinidad Camacho "Trino"; my analisys makes reference to a book by Jis called *Cats Do not Exist* (2004), and to the fact that it was actually published in English by Fantagraphics, which is *La Perdida*'s first publisher.

The sections that follow tackle specific cases of Mexican Iconic Displacement within the comics selected for the purpose of this research. The comics are presented in chronological order taking into account the year of their publication (in the case of serial novels, like *La Perdida*, I consider its year of publication as a single volume). All of the authors discussed are very aware of the importance of the cultural icons and the socio-political circumstances that have shaped Mexico's international identity in recent years — which I have discussed in the first chapter — and have carefully selected them to represent their understanding of Mexicanity. The examples of Iconic Displacement included in their works conform the main object of my analysis within the present case study.

Javier De Isusi's case illustrates the treatment of the revolutionary Latin American leader. The use of the iconic balaclava and its interchange from one character to another becomes one of the main strategies of representing his fictional work and his understanding of the dynamics in a community paradoxically called La Realidad. I explore his selection of an indigenous community in resistance and the icon of Sub-Comandante Marcos as its unifier.

Abel's case portrays what I call a "reverse situation". In *La Perdida*, a United States citizen struggles to support herself while living illegally in the suburban space of Mexico City. Abel makes use of the issue of her deportation from the country in order to illustrate a series of misconceptions that her character has embedded of Mexico's daily life, law and culture.

Life Sucks offers another case of a "reverse situation" in relation to illegal migration and urban marginality, this time within Los Angeles. I argue that the use of vampires in this novel is a metaphor of migrants in this multicultural city: they only go out at night, they struggle to find a source of nourishment. The icon of the Mexican migrant is compared to other struggling ethnic groups demonstrating that the social tissue within L.A. is so intricate that it turns really complex to differentiate one cultural icon from the other.

Peter Kuper's work offers a case of non-fictional iconic displacement. He is able to transfer Oaxacan cultural icons to the Big Apple and vice-versa. In the case of *Diario de Oaxaca* my main interest is to demonstrate Kuper's conscious juxtaposition of past and present icons, from truncated pyramids to contemporary Mexican graffiti and the influence of his years in Mexico on the aesthetic canon of his consecutive works.

The last case discussed in this chapter is Baudoin and Troub's work. Taking into account the concept of the "Superchild", I analyse in depth the narrative pre-conceptions these authors had about travel writing, about Ciudad Juarez and gender violence. Such preconceptions lead to cases of unconscious iconic replacement involving, for example, the figures of two revolutionary leaders Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa.

2.1. Where in the World of Comics?

I have presented a series of social, political and cultural factors that have enabled certain types of narratives based on contemporary Mexican issues to exist in the comic book format. In the present section I will describe and explain the active use of Mexican cultural icons in contemporary comic books, processes of both iconic displacement and iconic replacement included in visual narratives involving the topic of Mexicanity. In addition to this, I will point out some central issues of the multiple transformations that the editorial context has experienced in the past few years.

As a genre, comics, as Paul Gravett observes, have an already long tradition:

> Comics in book form have existed for at least two centuries, enjoying sporadic flurries of success, such as vogue in 1930 for worldless "pictorial narratives" sparked by Lynd Waed's *God's Man* in 1929, a fad stifled by the Depression, or more recently the media frenzy around *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* in the mid-1980s. (2005, 8).

I would like to situate the comics I am working with in the big picture, beyond their shared topic of Mexicanity, and to point out their relation to other types of current and past comic books. Although it is not rare to find comics like the ones analyzed in this research classified under the same ambiguous category called "graphic novels", I make very limited use of this term, propagated in the 1980's, as I often find it inaccurate. Very few of the books regarded as such are in fact literally graphic (visual art) novels (lengthy, fictitious prose narratives conceived as units). It should be noted that the medium of comics embraces works as varied as: fictional series like *Locas* (1982 to 1996), by Jaime Hernandez, who recreates the life of two main female characters in a Chicano —of Mexican origin— neighbourhood in California; autobiographical books like *Epileptic* (1996 - 2003), by David B., who narrates how his older brother's illness permeated his family life; pieces of journalism like *Palestine* (2001), by Joe Sacco, who spent two months in the West Bank and Gaza Strip interviewing dozens of people; and, indeed, novels like Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (1995-2005), settled in a fictional Seattle where a group of teenagers are threatened by a very contagious sexually transmitted disease.

Thus, the feature these works share is not necessarily belonging to the novelistic genre but being sequential, being comics: an independent medium and art form, not a literary genre or subgenre. Another significant factor is that all of the quoted examples were originally released as serialized issues and they appeared later as one-volume editions; such cases have contributed to identify these collected publications as "novels". In this sense, I find relevant to take into account the opinion of the British author, Alan Moore, who is one of the most influential creators in the history of comics, writer of *From Hell* (1991-1996) with art by Eddie Campbell and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2007), illustrated by Kevin O'Neill, among many other titles. In the 1980s Moore asserted that the term "graphic novel" was mostly popularized by marketing campaigns:

> I can see "graphic story" if you need it to call it something but the thing that happened in the mid-'80s was that there were a couple of things out there that you could just about call a novel. You could just about call *Maus* a novel, you could probably just about call *Watchmen* a novel, in terms of density, structure, size, scale, seriousness of theme, stuff like that. The problem is that "graphic novel" just came to mean "expensive comic book" and so what you'd get is people like DC Comics or Marvel comics - because "graphic novels" were getting some attention, they'd stick six issues of whatever worthless piece of crap they happened to be publishing lately under a glossy cover and call it *The She-Hulk Graphic Novel*. (Moore 1988, 12).

Furthermore, such stylish publications have misled readers to recognize "graphic novel" as the proper way to call comics and to acknowledge the seriousness and respectability of these works. As Paul Gravett asserts 17 years later, this is one of the main reasons why this term has been successfully positioned:

> In several ways graphic novel is a misnomer, but, unlike other words invented in the past in an effort to overcome the stigmas of humour and childishness of the word 'comics', like Charles Biro's 'Illustories', Bill Gaines' 'Picto-Fiction', or even Will Eisner's 'Sequential Art', this term has caught on and extended the language and dictionaries, for all its inaccuracies. (2005, 8).

In addition, in 2005 the Scottish artist Eddie Campbell published his own manifesto in which he states that "graphic novel" is more about a movement than a genre, as he asserts:

> "Graphic novel" is a disagreeable term, but we will use it anyway on the understanding that graphic does not mean anything to do with graphics and that novel does not mean anything to do with novels. (In the same way that "Impressionism" is not really an applicable

> term; in fact it was first used as an insult and then adopted in a spirit of defiance.) (Gravett 2005,9).

It can be inferred from the above quotes that most of the references mentioned are framed by an English-speaking context. I think it is equally important to consider traditions in other languages such as French, Japanese or Spanish, to name a few, which have had an outstanding comic book production. Regarding Latin America, Ana Merino mentions the case of the prolific Argentinian writer Héctor Germán Oesterheld, author of series such as *El Eternauta* (1957-1959), illustrated by Francisco Solano López. According to Merino: "It is important to note that Oesterheld invented the graphic novel, a form widely considered a United States creation. He preceded both Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman in labelling the genre, which arose with such literary force in Argentina. He called it 'the new comic' " (2009, 272.)

Despite the different aspects addressed by Moore, Gravett, Campbell and Merino, each one of them makes an important contribution to our understanding of how a new era of comics was born during the last decades of the 20th century. A historical precedent of such evolution dates back to 1954 when the burgeoning comics scene in the United States was partly truncated by the creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The CCA was formed to censor comics with excessive violence, to categorically forbid those where the evil triumphed over the good and to ban advertisements of alcohol, cigarettes and toiletry products.

In response to such repressive climate, during the early 1960s, the "Underground Comix" movement was born. The majority of the authors within this trend were doing self-publications sold at independent poster shops and head shops. When some of the creators of this movement were done with portraying drugs, murders and other forbidden topics and decided to produce more ambitious works a new era came to play.

Authors who were not interested in mainstream superheroes and whose work revealed a conscious reflection upon storytelling and graphic narrative started producing more complex and very innovative pieces of fiction such as Oesterheld's *Mort Cinder* (1962-1964), illustrated by Alberto Breccia, Spiegelman's *Maus* (1972-1990) or Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978). A new comics movement had begun, some people call it alternative comics and some others simply call it renaissance. In Mexico, editorial groups such as OEPISA published the works by Marvel translated into Spanish.

As for the Mexican scene, in the mid 1960's, one of the most prolific authors living in Mexico was the Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky, who began the series *Aníbal 5* (1966), illustrated by Mexican artist Manuel Cid Moro. In this same decade, the artist Sergio Aragonés, born in Spain and raised in Mexico, moved to New York, where he became a regular contributor to the only available space in the magazine *MAD*: the margins. This rare opportunity would give the artist a distinctive style and added a unique and attractive element to the already popular magazine.

In this same period, a Mexican author Eduardo Del Río, "Rius" became famous since the appearance of his first cartoons filled with a harsh sense of criticism on the Mexican political system. In the controversial year of 1968, Rius was jailed in connection with the Tlatelolco protest that had ended in a brutal governmental repression that included the massacre of hundreds of students. One of his works that I find worthy of mention for the purpose of this research is a comic book entitled *The Endless Conquest of Mexico* (1984). As Carlos F. Maldonado Valera describes, the book cover shows a terrified Indian fleeing a Spanish conquistador who in turn is pursued by Uncle Sam.

And it was also in the sixties that two famous Mexican cartoonists were born in the city of Guadalajara. Their works brighten the scene of the current political cartoon in the country. José Ignacio Solórzano, "Jis", whose work can be followed in the Mexico City newspaper *Milenio* and José Trinidad Camacho, "Trino". Both artists have participated in a number of joint collaborations and may be said that they are among the leading artists of today's Mexican graphic narrative. Fantagraphics, the American editorial house founded in 1976, publisher of the first series of *La Perdida*, published *Cats Do not Exist* (2004), Jis' first anthology translated into English.

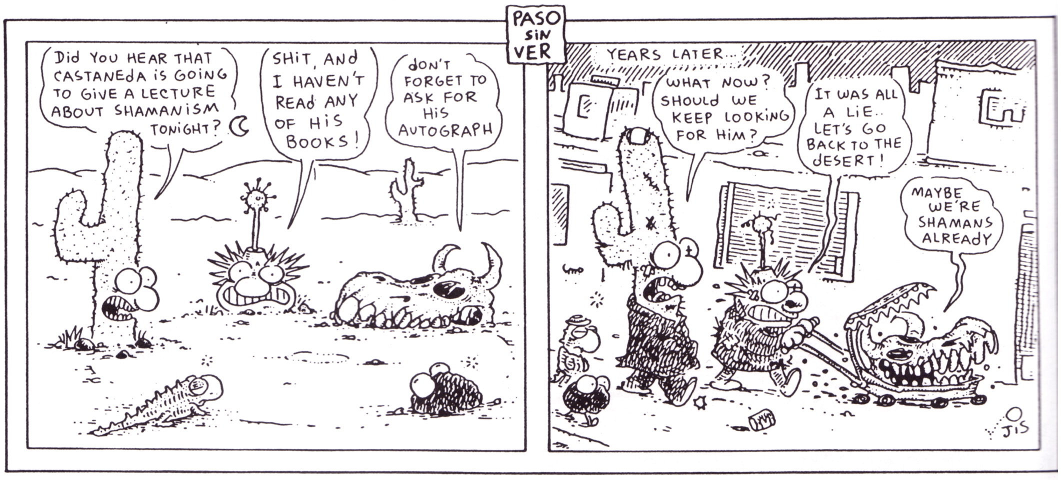


Figure 39. JIS (2004) *Cats Do not Exist* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 76).

Jis satirizes the figure of Carlos Castaneda, Peruvian-born anthropologist who moved to California in his youth and published many works related to Toltec shamanism. Just like Artaud, who was mentioned earlier, did in the first half of the 20th century, Castaneda made an intensive investigation of pre-Hispanic Mexican rituals marking a milestone in the psychedelic scene of the 1960's and 1970's. In the above panels there is a contrast between the desert landscape and the metropolis and a sarcastic wink to the migrant's absurd search since he has not found what he came looking for.

The above example is a cartoon produced by someone born in the 1960's, seen by many as the beginning of a new era, and a confirmation of the fact that this period has set a fundamental precedent for the early twenty first century comics analyzed in this research. In order to further elaborate in the importance of this influential period, I find pertinent to mention that in the book *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud attributes the expansion of comics creativity to "twelve revolutions" among which three of them are "gender balance", "minority representation" as well as the use of multiple "genres" (2000, 96) and they all have a central topic in common: diversity.

Is not only that in comics, as in every other art form, ideas related to Modernism and Postmodernism gave way to the awareness of diversity and emphasized the importance of representing peripheral, individual and antiheroic worlds and characters; but also the fact that authors, publishers and illustrators from all corners of the world, and addressing their own realities or creating fictional worlds parting from their very particular vision, have increased considerably over the past three decades. A very relevant precedent for the present study dates back to 1981, year in which three brothers from Oxnard California, Jaime, Mario and Gilbert Hernandez, self-published with great success the first issue of *Love and Rockets*. The next year, Fantagraphics Books decided to publish the magazine. In September 1982, *Love and Rockets* was released with two main ongoing series: *Palomar* by Gilbert and *Locas* or *Hoppers 13*, by Jaime. Their brother Mario remained as sporadic contributor.

According to Scott McCloud the Hernandez brothers were part of a group of independent creators who: “drew on their experiences to break past the role-model/victim/stereotype parameters that had boxed in mainstream writers in the 70s and 80s’” (McCloud 1996, 18) and thanks to *Love and Rockets* “the number of interesting Mexican and Mexican-American characters in comics had tripled overnight” (McCloud 18) during the 1980’s decade.

Until 1996 *Love and Rockets* was published regularly. When issue number 50 came to light, the brothers decided to temporarily cease its production to work on independent projects. This collection, that appeared over the course of 14 years, is now known as *Love and Rockets Vol. 1* and has been comprised by Fantagraphics in seven books and other anthologies by authors. The original issues have also been edited and reprinted in what Fantagraphics defines as “slightly different format.”

The next comics series, or Volume 2, was produced from 2001 to 2007. And from 2008 until now “Los Bros. Hernandez” have been publishing the *Love and Rockets New Stories*. However, it was mainly *Love and Rockets Vol. 1* what became one of the most emblematic pieces of the Alternative or Renaissance Comics revolution. It was a revolutionary comic for many reasons. The main characters are strong Mexican-American women. And when I say strong I am not talking about classic super heroines, quite the opposite, I am thinking of Maggie the mechanic, Rena and Vicki, the wrestlers, Hopey, the punk bassist, Izzy, the *curandera*, Chelo, the sheriff and Luba, the mayor, among many other female characters inspired in women of the Hispanic-low-income-minority in the South of the United States.

“Los Bros. Hernandez” achieved to play with and in most cases mock of multiple literary conventions: from the stereotypical portrait of a Chicano family and their use of code switching, by introducing occasional words in Spanish, to panels evoking Magical Realism or Science Fiction. They also achieved to reflect upon formal aspects of the comics language and their creative process. The importance of the reader's response is constantly revealed and so is the role of the artist behind his characters evolution. Through the years, readers found the main characters grow old, their bodies depicted and their psychic flow written according to their age and life circumstances. All of these qualities point towards the narrative density of the texts and the consciousness these authors had from the very beginning of comics as works of art. To briefly illustrate the extent of the influence the series had globally, it can be mentioned that a very popular rock band in the UK formed in 1985 was named "Love and Rockets" after the comic.

Regarding the three revolutions mentioned by McCloud and how they are visible in the comics analyzed in this research, when referring to the first one, gender balance, McCloud argues that the Underground period allowed many women to produce "raw, emotionally honest, politically charged and sexually frank" works (102), such openness led the way for "today's field of women cartoonists" to become "too varied, to classify as any one kind of movement" (102). I agree with McCloud that Jessica Abel belongs to this category of independent female contemporary creators and I would also add that, although her two books analyzed here do share an insight of diverse aspects related to Mexican culture, *La Perdida* responds more to a very personal creative need inspired by the author's experience of living in Mexico City while *Life Sucks* is a collective work settled in a multicultural fictional Los Angeles, illustrated by Warren Pleece, a British artist, and co-written by Abel and Spanish-American author Gabe Soria. So whereas *La Perdida* could be regarded as a clear sign of the merging of genders in comics authorship, *Life Sucks* could be related to a visible need in contemporary comics to represent plurality and minorities.

In what McCloud calls the "diversity of genre" revolution he refers to the proliferation of multiple types of comics such as autobiographic comics, which could be the case of Peter Kuper's *Diario de Oaxaca*, or naturalistic fiction, and this could be a suitable way to describe *La pipa de Marcos* by Javier De Isusi.

Furthermore, as it will be demonstrated, I think that all of the comics involved in this research share the interest of representing an internalization of multiple concurrent realities in contemporary Mexico. These books address, for example, a variety of conflicts within the Mexican population: from the army intervening in a rebellious territory in Chiapas, to the tensions between the police force and the teachers syndicate during the riots in Oaxaca; or from a very realistic and feasible situation recreated in *La Perdida*, where a criminal band kidnaps a foreigner in Mexico City, to the violence against women in Ciudad Juarez or the struggles endured by Mexican and other immigrants in Los Angeles, California. All of these conflicts shown through the eyes of foreigners, through the eyes of narrative voices immersed as temporal observers of such realities and therefore grasping a very particular angle of the conflict, an angle permeated not only by what they are seeing but by what their own collective imaginary —consciously or subconsciously— enables them to see. In this thesis I argue that this mechanism is inherent to the creative process of comics and therefore I am using the example of Mexican icons as a case study in order to demonstrate its dynamics in detail.

As a matter of fact, the shared topic of Mexicanity is only a thematic example of what these works might have in common. Actually, all of these books belong to a broader trend and they also share what McCloud observes as a visible generalized tendency in contemporary comics: “though healthy for its lack of a common “style,” qualities such as dramatic understatement, subtle, unhurried characterization, and clear, unpretentious art are all becoming associated with the trend.” (112). So this “trend” is applicable to numerous contemporary comics with the most varied styles, to name a couple examples that have nothing to do with the topic of Mexicanity, there is Bellstrof’s graphic novel *Baby’s in Black* (2011), settled in Hamburg in the 1960’s, it tells the story of a new English band called “The Beatles”; another example could be Seth’s semi-autobiographic semi-fictional novella *It’s a Good Life if You Do not Weaken* (1996), that takes place in Ontario, Canada, during the 1990’s. It is interesting to mention that in this book Seth chooses to juxtapose completely invented and real iconic Canadian comics characters and authors in order to produce a visual review of his country’s cultural identity.

In summary, nowadays the medium of comics has a wide diversity of formats, authors, genres, topics, countries of origin, languages, styles and readership. In a comic book, the chosen vocabulary tells as much of where the author is standing as the selection of pictures does. The books analyzed in this research are, in many aspects, part of a tendency significantly wider than their shared interest on Mexican culture, and therefore, the methodology applied here could be transferred to many other comics in different case studies.

In the following sections I will present a detailed analysis of different cases of iconic displacement as found in each one of the main comic books studied in this thesis. The works are presented in chronological order based on the date of their first publication.

2.2. Exploring "La Realidad"

Javier De Isusi was born in Bilbao in 1972, soon after he graduated from the School of Architecture in San Sebastian he travelled extensively in Latin America. In 2003 he created his first comic strip with the Argentinean author Luciano Saracino and a year later he published the first volume of his tetralogy *Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (2004-2010), a fictional series partly inspired in his experience while travelling in Mexico, Central and South America. In addition, De Isusi contributed in the creation of a music disc called *Mentiroso mentiroso* with his compatriot and rock pop musician Iván Ferreiro.

Set near the southern border, *La pipa de Marcos* shows the rural side of Mexico. A land of contrast, this is one of the richest Mexican regions in terms of biodiversity and other natural resources; it is, for example the state with the most microclimates in the country and has got forests, waterfalls, volcanoes, rivers among countless natural beauties. It is also a state with a wide variety of ethnic groups and important gems of pre-Columbian and colonial architecture. And it is one of the least developed and lowest income areas. Since the 1990's, numerous indigenous communities were publicly declared in resistance.

This is the first book of the four-volume saga published over the course of six years. The main character, Vasco, travels from Spain into the heart of the Zapatista territory in the south of Mexico searching for his long time friend, Juan, who has disappeared mysteriously while travelling in Latin America. Vasco manages to pass through the security controls that prevent foreigners from entering into the community of La Realidad, where he gets to acknowledge the many clashes between the Zapatistas and the army, as well as the interactions between the international observers and the local people. Vasco interrelates with different members of the community and saves the day when an army helicopter that tried to land in La Realidad aborts the mission when the crew spots him on the ground "recording" the events with what looks like a video-camera (which in reality is a cardboard box smartly disguised).

The dialogues are very important for this comic, which makes use of poetic phrases and deep thoughts linked to the natural landscape and the somewhat hidden identity of everyone living there. But there are also numerous pages with no dialogues, like the following one:

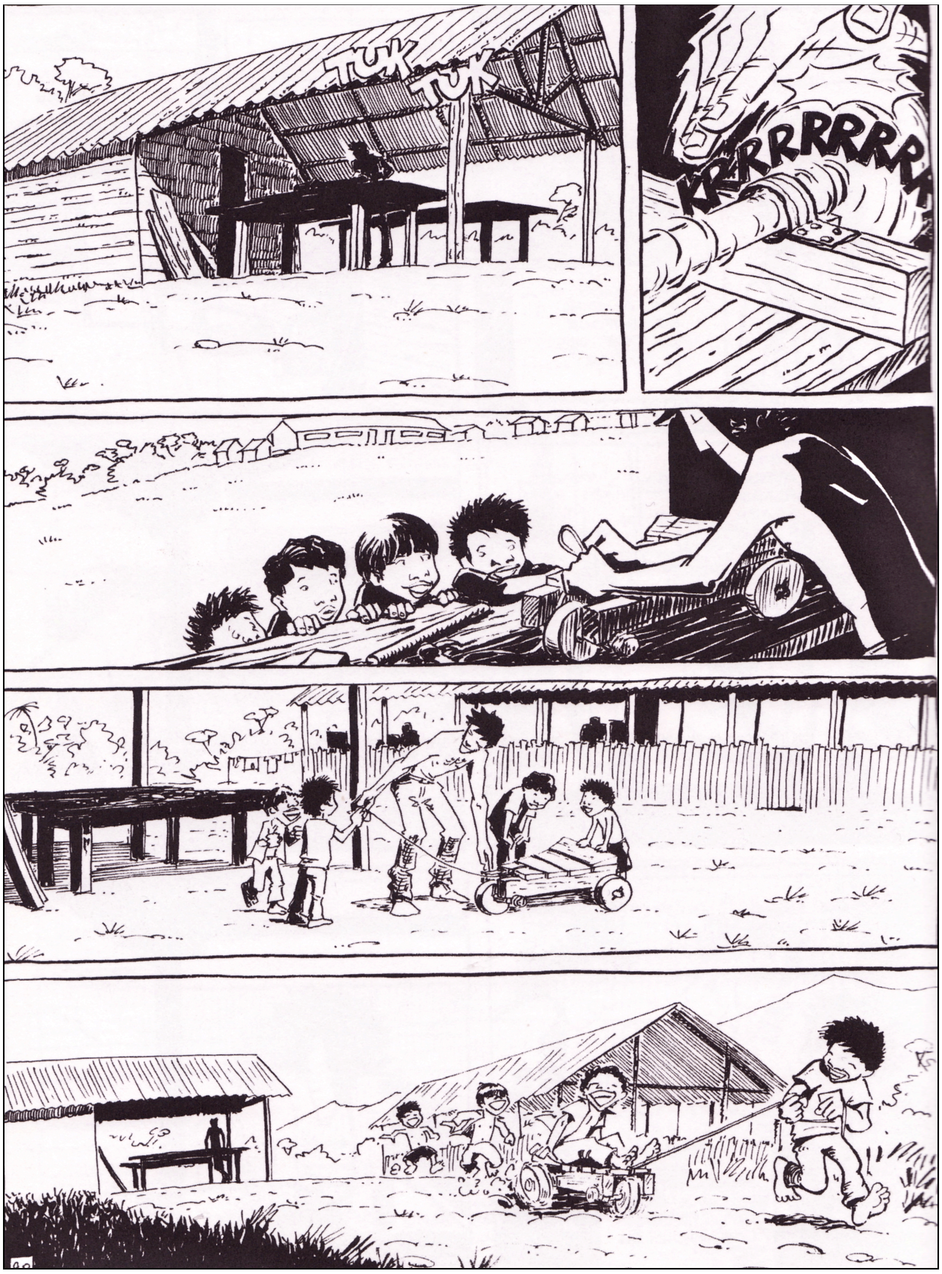


Figure 40. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 104).

As I have mentioned before Vasco takes time to enjoy the life in this camping zone where does not seem to be signs of terrorism or war as he had been prevented when trying to reach this area. The page shown above is apparently speech-free but it is not like this in reality, there is sound in almost every panel represented by few elements like onomatopoeias (panels 1-2). The grin on Vasco's face while children look at him expectantly (panel 3), or their smiling faces bursting with laughter and the wheels moving on the soil and Vasco's figure in the back looking at them (panel 4) portray a sequence of a tranquil day in the community. This is partly autobiographical, as De Isusi pinpoints in an interview conceded to *Guía del cómic*:

> Había dos razones muy importantes para mí para marcar esos tiempos de silencio y de pararse. Una es porque es la realidad de lo que pasa allí, hay muchos momentos de no hacer nada, y hay que disfrutarlos así, como lo que son. El otro motivo es marcar el espacio entre unas conversaciones y otras, dejar que se asiente un poco toda la información que se ha dado, que es muy despistante, te lleva de un lado para otro, aunque al final ves que toda la información recibida no sirve para nada, que es lo que quería contar. (De Isusi, 2005).
>
> [There were two very important reasons for me to mark the times of silence and stop. One is because it is the reality of what happens there, there are many moments of doing nothing, and you have to enjoy them as well, as they are. The other reason is to mark the space between one conversation and another, let all the information that has been given settle a bit, otherwise is very confusing, since it takes you from one place to another, but in the end you see that all the information received is completely useless, that's what I wanted to tell anyway]

Narrated and illustrated in a realistic style, the book plays constantly with the treachery of appearances: for instance, some of the visitors there are genuinely proactive while some others act as fans of Marcos and pursue their own idealization of the Zapatista movement. There is, for example, an Argentinean visitor who longs for a private meeting with Marcos because she is in love with him, in this sense her presence proves to be frivolous; there are other "campistas" [campers] in La Realidad that loose the focus of what they are doing there and members of EZLN are sent to remind them of their real mission:

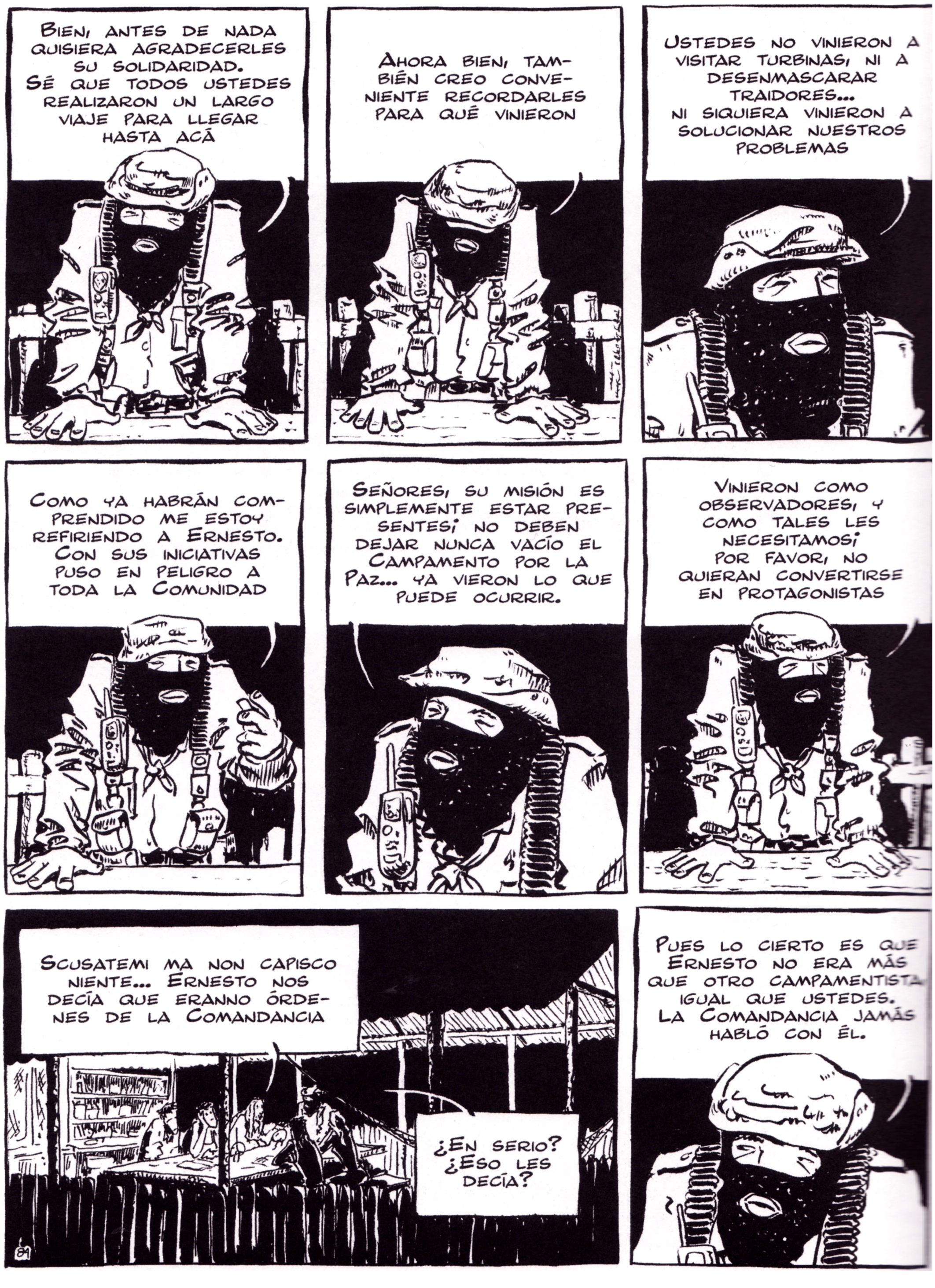


Figure 41. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 90).

As De Isusi recalls, international visitors often do not find out anything because they are not allowed to know confidential information from the EZLN for security reasons. But they are all very welcomed as observers. And, when someone seems to forget this simple but important role, as it happens in the comic with the character of Ernesto, they are reminded of their function within this social structure. This character had named himself as the "super commandant" of the camp (although he was a simple camper just like the rest of them there) and he was constantly suspicious of having an infiltrated spy. Ernesto therefore sent Vasco to keep an eye on Giorgio, an Italian man who has been living in La Realidad for a few months and who has got the habit to go on hiding everyday for a while. So one day Vasco follows him into the woods and to his great surprise he discovers that this man is only there searching for a bit of privacy because he has got an amoeba stomach infection and he does not feel comfortable using the toilet facilities of where he lives. In other words, through playful glimpses and everyday life situations, the narrative always allows room for the reader to acknowledge that nothing is exactly what it seems: all the characters reflect something about each other, all of them are as simple as human beings who fall in love or get sick and as complex as Marcos who has a secret life. As De Isusi asserts:

> En *La pipa de Marcos* yo andaba más diluido entre todos los personajes, casi todos tenían buena parte de mí y curiosamente Vasco, que en ese tomo apenas se muestra, es casi con el que menos me identifico. Pero a medida que la serie avanza se le va viendo más y en esa medida también se me verá más a mí, supongo. (De Isusi, 2007).
>
> [In *La pipa de Marcos* I was more diluted among all the characters, almost all of them had a good part of me and curiously Vasco, which is barely shown in that volume, is the one I identify with the least. But as the series progresses it shows more and more of him and to that extent, it shows more of me too]

The information Vasco manages to gather about his friend Juan is merely a series of clues that will lead him to Nicaragua –where the story in the second volume is set. So, as the title points out, this is not only Vasco's journey, is Vasco following on Juan's travels. As De Isusi describes, he found his inspiration for this character in a song by the leftist Chilean singer and activist, Victor Jara, who was killed in 1973 by the repressive forces of Dictator Augusto Pinochet:

> The character of Juan Sin Tierra was born at the time I heard the ballad of Victor Jara ... I found it a really good name. Victor Jara takes that name and puts the character in the Zapatista revolution, that of Emiliano, and turns him into a typical peasant named Juan who has no land. So I thought of another Juan Sin Tierra: a traveller, that is, a guy without land, without a country, who is travelling. (De Isusi 2007).

In addition, there is also the reminiscent to a historical character dating from the times of the crusades John, King of England, the younger brother of Richard the Lionheart who was often nicknamed as John Lackland.

As I have mentioned before, in the authors analyzed in this thesis, there is a clearly noticeable difference between those who only spent a few weeks or months in their chosen area of Mexico and those who lived there for years. Nevertheless, they all remained as temporary residents in the country. De Isusi shows awareness of his temporary status of local resident in La Realidad. As it has been explained in the section titled "Mexicanity within Multicultural Fictional Worlds" he is a local foreigner and a very recent one, in the same way that the artist Francis Alÿs was during his first months in the country when he often used to perform outside Mexico's city cathedral with a sign that said "tourist",

> I believe that at the time, it was an honest account of my situation, of my status. That was my perception of myself, it was how I experienced myself and how I projected myself. Now things are different. In spite of my disguise as a foreigner, a stranger, I have been here longer than many of my neighbours, and perhaps I have already become a local character for them. (Alÿs 2006, 128).

Alÿs has actually interspersed his foreignness with Mexico City's centre so deeply that he has now turned himself into a local foreigner. In a very similar way, the community of foreigners living in La Realidad, as depicted by De Isusi, has turned into a local aspect of Chiapas. As Marcos asserts, these visitors and observers are the ones who belong there:

> Transnational companies, international capital or financial capital do not come to visit Zapatista communities. Men and women, students, teachers, sometimes marginal

> groups, sometimes not, above all from Europe, but also from the United States, South America, Asia, they all come to learn and to give a little, or a lot, of what they know, to exchange it with the communities and to receive something in return. The foreigners (and yes, these are the foreigners) that come to rob and manipulate the wealth of the country, they do not come to the Zapatista communities they go to Los Pinos or to the PRI." (Duran and Higgins 1999, 275).

De Isusi portrays a world that clearly shows the paradox of how real and unreal the community of La Realidad is and how difficult it is to find what he went to look for or how easily this journey seems to turn into a search of one's own. So changing the roles of the characters and the sense of the visited space is De Isusi's main strategy: the seeker turns into the searched object, Mexico turns out to be not the final destination but the beginning of a long tour that continues in Central and South America. The Chiapas region is not only an accurate geographical location to begin a long journey that reaches Nicaragua, Ecuador, the Amazonian jungle, Peru and Brazil; it is also an ideological starting point.

In my opinion, De Isusi is very much aware of his role as a permeable author who narrates a permeable story, he in fact confirms so when he describes his own creative process and how did he choose the Chiapas region in particular:

> When you create a story the feeling I have is that you become a channel of that story. The story is there, floating in the air and hopes to find a channel to exit. Suddenly you appear and the story goes through you, going through your personal filter (with your preferences and hobbies) and out through your personal skills. In my case it turned out in comics but if I were ... uh, I dunno, Pedro Guerra it would have left a record. Well, it's my personal perception, that's how I live the creative process, a bit like what Michelangelo said that to sculpt was simply to remove all that excess stone of the statue. The statue is already there and the sculptor's skill is to know how to remove it as pure as possible. In my case I feel that the story is there and my job is to decipher what happens next, so if the story came to me happening in Chiapas and Nicaragua... I could not relocate

> (which does not mean that would not work in Cambodia for example). (De Isusi 2006).

By the end of the book, there is a night where Vasco has a series of encounters with the “real” Marcos because he appears to be incarnated by different characters –since, as it has been explained in the introduction, anyone could be represented by Marcos’ iconic figure– but when they take the balaclava off, they are just the same common people Vasco has been spending time with over the past few days. Marcos’ appearance does not entail the solving of a mystery; on the contrary, it confirms the paradox of Chiapas and the whole journey. In fact, there is never the certainty of Marco’s really ever appearing in the comic book:

Figure 42. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 121).

A very interesting juxtaposition conveyed through the senses being Marcos brings both a warming sensation and a scrapping of the throat (panel 2) which is something everyone gets to experience from time to time (panel 3) but the paradox of being or not with the real Marcos still remains there (panel 4).

A key aspect of De Isusi's fictional La Realidad is how he depicts multicultural coexistence within the community. The author makes occasional playful glimpses to the local's forms of speech, such as the expressions of his young friend nicknamed "Solín", or a conscious effort to reproduce Mexican Spanish, when members of the army or the EZLN make an appearance. As for the international visitors, the Italianized expressions on Giorgio's dialogues or the emulations of Natalia's Argentinean accent are also remarkable. Nevertheless, De Isusi's preponderant speech is rich in colloquialisms from Iberian Spanish verifiable in most of the speech balloons and descriptions, regardless of the character's place of origin. With this strategy he successfully achieves to convey a personal point of view without pretending to show an "objective" or "impartial" approach of the community. The narrator has indeed grasped how other people talk and behave in this completely new environment, but this is always interspersed with the author's cultural horizon precedent from Spain. In other words, the character is allowed to be who he is within this space and this sets a precedent for the following destinations. It is precisely Sub-Commandant Marcos who asserts the following about international visitors:

> I would not say that they come only to give but also to receive. In one form or another the encounter between the Zapatista indigenous communities and the people from other nations has been a process of teaching, learning, and of recognition of one another. (Duran and Higgins 1999, 275).

De Isusi lived as an observer in La Realidad for three months and the comic book he produced shows signs of being very much in tune with this idea described by Sub-Commandant Marcos who regards international visitors in Zapatista communities as a positive and natural aspect of their cause:

> We do not call them foreigners but internationals, referring to other nations, and not to their foreignness. The communities have realized that these people come to fight beside us for a just and dignified peace. The best way, though, to explain to the people outside is that they come for themselves and see what these people from other countries do and say here. (Duran and Higgins 1999, 275).

It should also be taken into account that the comic book illustrates not only the visitor's role as an observer but also how the character of Vasco, just like the character of his absent friend who only left echoes of his presence, is able to link his place of origin with this community where he finds himself reflected. The main character shows numerous autobiographical aspects, his name Vasco makes allusion to the author's region of origin; De Isusi, a Bilbao-born architect, spent a year travelling in Latin America where he immersed himself not only in the communities he visited but also in Latin-American comics and literature. Once back in Spain, he started his career as comics author. *La pipa de Marcos* shows the author's full awareness of key aspects of the Zapatista ideology, how politically charged not only Latin-American comics but arts and literature found in these countries are, and it is very much in this line how Vasco's character is depicted. Vasco is someone who arrives to important conclusions about why he went to La Realidad:

> We think that (the internationals) come, in one form or another, looking for a mirror, a form of seeing their own personnel struggle reflected, a means of affirmation. That this mirror does not always show the best has also to be understood. For the people of the communities themselves, the internationals have also acted like a mirror that has reinforced them, it has also helped them to expand their horizons, freeing them from the temptations of fundamentalism or of millenarianism that can be held within a movement that has an ethnic majority as in our case. (Duran and Higgins 1999, 275).

Finally it is noteworthy that De Isusi's comments on foreigners are clearly criticisms on himself as well: "Vasco is a character that listens and reacts to what happens. The others [international visitors] are a little caricature of what happens to many people who go there, among whom I include myself." (De Isusi 2007). So the main icon of displacement in this novel is the character of Vasco and this is a clear premise of the four-volume saga. The author knows that La Realidad is, in many ways, a construction, a game of appearances and he is very apt at reproducing this strategy and to never impose it as the official truth of what is going on in the heart of the Zapatista conflict. He is, therefore, in great command of the resort of permeable boundaries. In the following section I explore to detail the use of one of the most important Mexican cultural icons of this comic book: Marcos' balaclava.

2.2.1. The Icon of a Masked Face

De Isusi is using the comic book format to recreate different aspects of the EZLN, a movement that has been widely influenced by an iconic language in several different levels. One of them, already mentioned, is the replicated effect of portraits as was explained when comparing Marcos to Zapata and Che Guevara in the section called Latin American Iconic Archetypes. Another one, a bit more complex, could be described by highlighting a few parallelisms between Marcos' self-depiction and discourse and those of a classic comic book, *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd. The story is settled in the end of the 1990's in a fictional London. The world is facing the aftermath of a global nuclear war and an extremist right-wing government leads Great Britain. The main character, V, wears a Guy Fawkes mask and unlike the latter, whose Gunpowder Plot failed in 1605, V succeeds on his attempt to detonate a bomb on the Parliament in the night of the 5th of November 1997. The story, with V being chased by multiple enemies and him managing to make a public call for people to rise against the authorities, touches every sensible, and surprisingly up-to-date, fibre: it can be related to the Arab spring or the paedophile priests' scandals and the countless cases of discrimination of minorities such as homosexuals or vulnerable immigrants. When V is mortally wounded by one of his enemies, he manages to get to his secret liar where he dies next to his female disciple and protégée, Evey. The young woman not only resists the temptation to remove his mentor's mask in order to discover his true identity but also plots her own revenge. Dressed up as Guy Fawkes, Evey takes V's body into an Underground train and sets a bomb which explodes as the train is passing right under 10 Downing Street. Just like V rescued Evey from the streets, she does the same thing with an unconscious young man, Dominic, who wakes up in the secret liar and Evey, still dressed up as Fawkes, introduces herself as V. And so Dominic's training as the new successor begins.

As I have mentioned before, nowadays anti-establishment protests, not so different from those in medieval times, have been taking place all over the world with people wearing Guy Fawkes masks as stylized by Lloyd in this comic book:

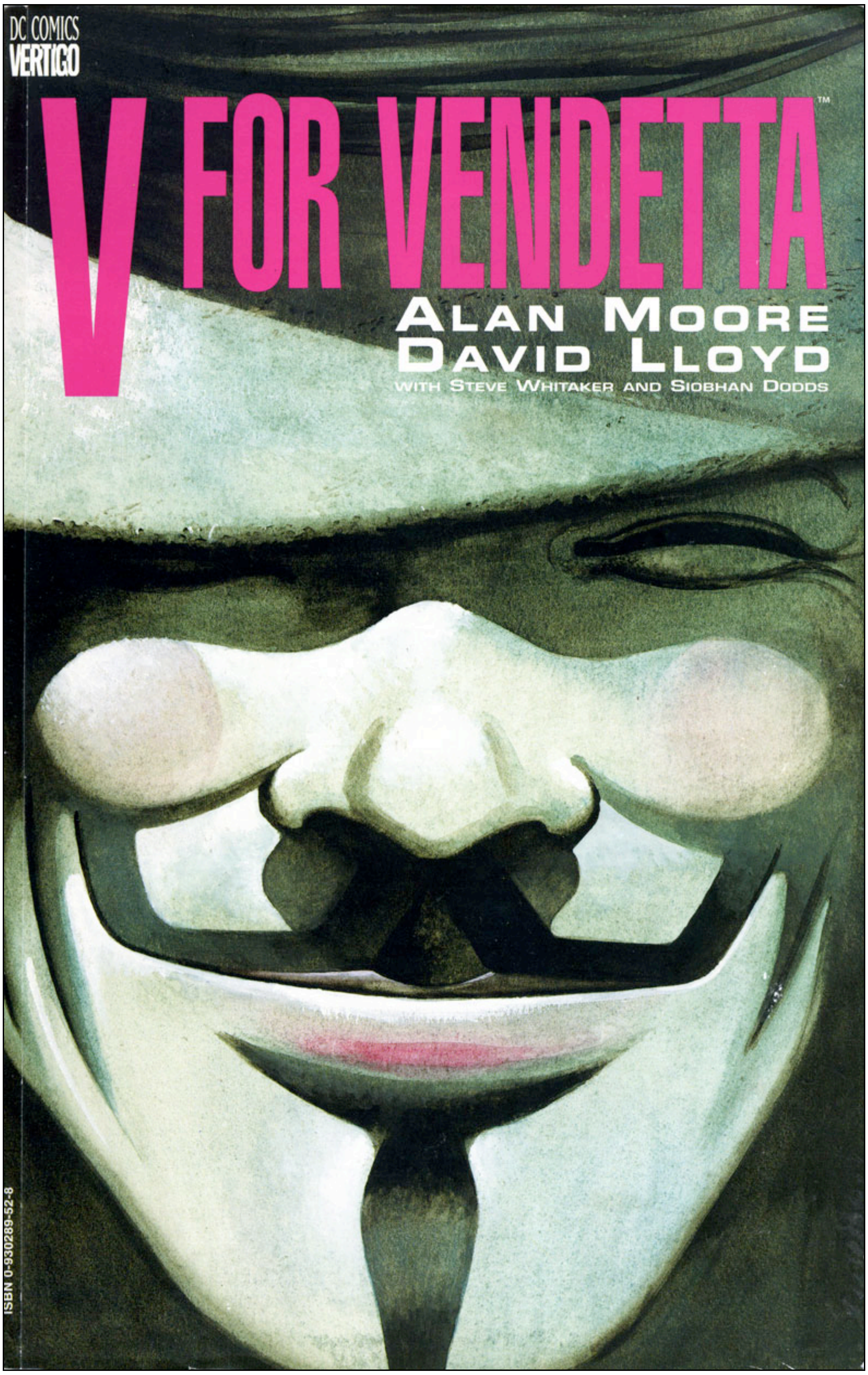


Figure 43. Moore, Alan, Lloyd David (2005) *V for Vendetta* (London: Titan Books Ltd).

The mask has turned into an international unified and displaced cultural icon of a few parallel ongoing movements: for instance, the Occupy movement initiated in New York in September 2011 and replicated in almost 100 cities in more than 80 different countries. A famous case was that of Julian Assange, *Wikileaks* founder, who wore the mask for a few minutes in one of the protests held in London during the 15th of October 2011 until police obliged him to remove it. Regarding this situation, Assange declared:

> Under a new section used, people cannot wear masks in London, they cannot wear facial coverings in London, and that basic anonymity is denied to people. I say, that sometimes it may be legitimate to deny anonymity, but we should not accept it until Swiss bank account and offshore bank accounts are also denied of their anonymity. (Messieh 2011).

Such declaration made by the man who founded an organization that disseminates compromising confidential information seems to vindicate what Bakhtin identifies as the order of the people. And let's also not forget that the international group *Anonymous* conformed by hackers in different parts of the world also presents the tendency to upload videos with speakers dressed up as Guy Fawkes. In other words, such actions of Internet activism are a consequence of a broader movement that finds its origins in times as remote as the Middle Ages and the tendency to hide the individual identity of the denouncer is not necessarily dependant on the use of the Internet and digital media. And what is more important, as Assange's words point out, protesters have identified anonymity as a most useful tool, an organizing tool. During the protests against media manipulation in the presidential election campaign held in Mexico in May 2012, examples of both an iconic juxtaposition and displacement have been visible all over the country:

Figure 44. 24HORAS (2012) "Miles protestan contra "imposición" de Peña." (Accessed 23 July 2012 http://www.24-horas.mx/miles-protestan-contra-

imposicion-de-pena/).

The picture above was taken during the student movement dubbed "the Mexican spring", originated in Mexico City and replicated all throughout the country in order to demand a more balanced coverage of the electoral campaign. This movement has, among other key points, pronounced itself against media manipulation, in favour of the indigenous communities in resistance and has also demanded freedom of expression. In this case, by being juxtaposed in a territory that is not their original context, the icons of Guy Fawkes and Zapata are creating a frontier with a multiplicity of converging discourses. This is what I meant in the introduction when I said that there is a translocation of iconic comics to real life mobilizations. This protester is, himself, a compound of juxtaposed boundaries and a moving cultural frontier.

So a crowd wearing balaclavas, as is the case of the EZLN or Guy Fawkes masks in the Occupy movement, is an organized crowd suspending the power of repressive forces. That's what the young man in the picture above or a person mocking *milites* in the twelve century and a student dressed up as a policeman in London in 2011 have in common. As Bakhtin asserts:

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, *the way of the people*. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (1985, 255).

Having stated all this, there are a number of parallelisms that can be pin pointed between the interchangeable Guy Fawkes costumes in *V for Vendetta* and the black balaclavas shown in the comic *La pipa de Marcos*. Just like the character of Evey inherits the identity of V and will eventually pass it on to Dominic, *La pipa de Marcos* is a book filled with playful glimpses like passing the pipe from one character to another, all of them in black balaclavas, and each one of them claiming to be its owner or, in other words, the real Marcos.

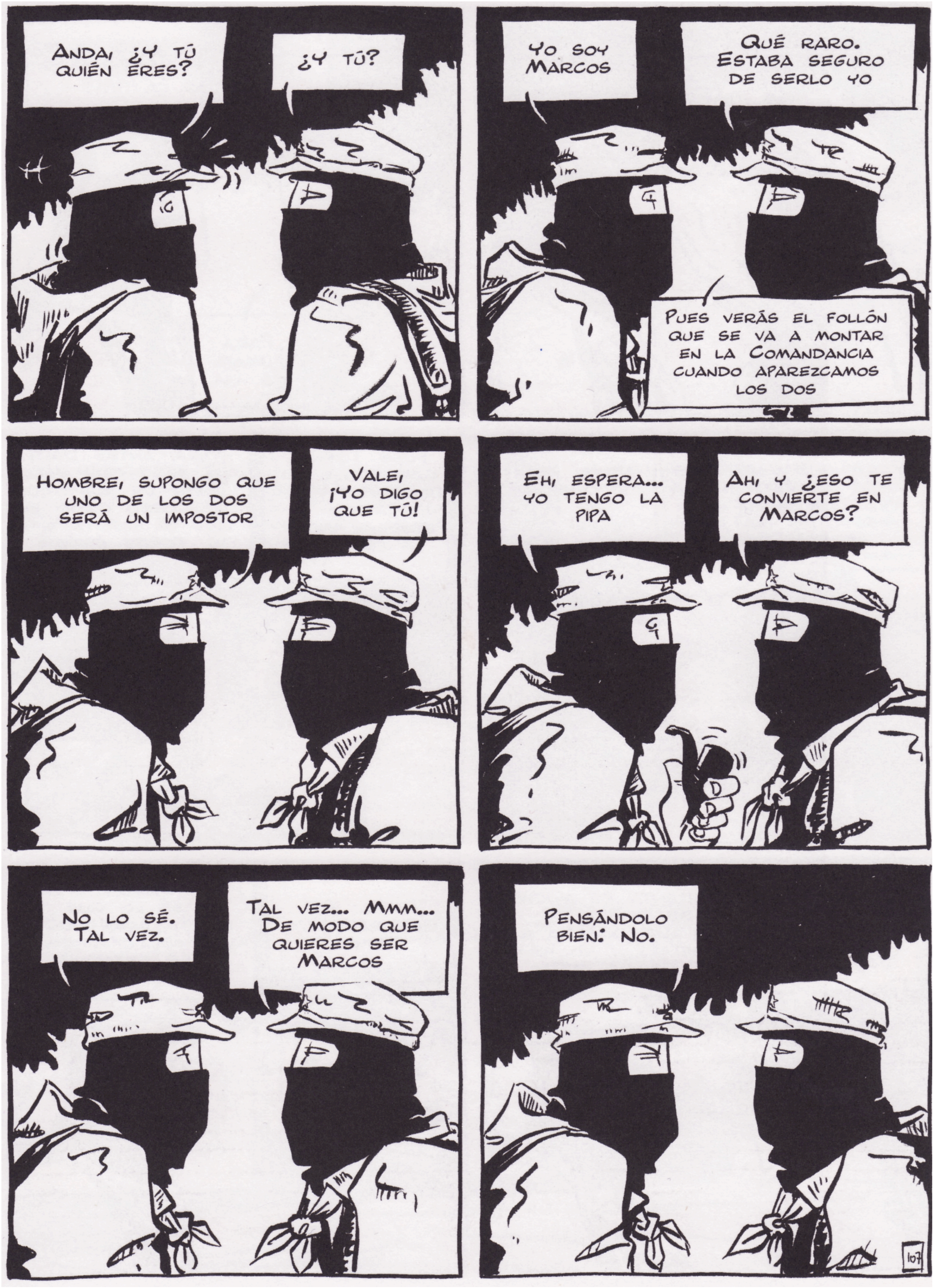


Figure 45. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 114).

(panel 1) [Come on! who are you?] [And you?]

(panel 2) [I' Marcos] [How weird! I was sure that was me] [Well, we'll kick up a fuss when we both show up at the command headquarters, you'll see]

(panel 3) [No man, I suppose that one of us is an impostor] [OK, I say that's you!]

(panel 4) [But, wait… I've got the pipe] [So? Does that turn you into Marcos?]

In the above panels the character to the left is Vasco, a Spaniard who has travelled to Chiapas and is caught wearing Marcos' outfit by the character to the right, who bumps into him claiming to be the real Marcos. Expressions such "anda" [come on] (panel 1), "follón" [fuss] (panel 2) or "vale" [OK] (panel 3) belong to a colloquial speech from Spain. This is where I can clearly identify De Isusi's role in La Realidad as international observer displaced to fiction and presented in the iconic language of comics. The author is not pretending to emulate the conversational form of local people in Chiapas, he is showing his honest perception of it. The pipe (panel 4) is a symbolic support of the narrative's subjectivity. The title of the book, *La pipa de Marcos* ["In Marcos Pipe"], could be a synonym of "in Marcos shoes." This sense of empathy with the character doesn't mean that the visitor must "mimmetize" with Marcos, it rather means that he is able to see reality through Marcos' balaclava while still being himself.

The power of iconic characters such as this representation of Marcos or V lies largely in this interchangeable quality. If anyone can be Marcos and anyone can be V, then exterminating individuals, as it happened to Zapata or Che, is not the most effective way to quiet down these rebellious voices. It is not only their looks (image) that can be interchangeable but also their speech (words) that can be displaced from one reality to another. While the character of V asserts: "Did you think to kill me? There's no flesh or blood within this cloak to kill. There's only an idea. Ideas are bullet-proof." Marcos declares:

> Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains. (Marcos 1997).

And while V asserts: "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people" (Moore 2005, 112) In the entrance of every Zapatista community there is a sign with the following notice: "You are in Zapatista rebel territory. Here the people command and the government obeys."

So, according to this worldview, Marcos and V are icons built in order to defend the oppressed, the non-tolerated, to represent the unrepresented minorities that, when summed up, as they point out, ironically enough, conform the so-called 99%. Such potential to reunite so many minority causes under one movement is what turns icons like a mask so easily displaceable as they resonate with protesters from all over the world supporting a wide variety of causes: from unemployed graduate students protesting in the UK to anti-capitalist remonstrations in New York or environmental activists in the Gulf of Mexico. As Marcos points out in his own self-description, he has built an icon flexible enough to be applicable to practically anyone fighting for human rights.

The comparison above doesn't necessarily mean that Marcos is inspired by *V for Vendetta* or that De Isusi is deliberately echoing Moore and Lloyd. It might also be true that dozens of people protesting wearing Guy Fawkes masks are not very familiar with the story or the comic book. But what is important is that they all share this collective order, "the order of the people" against what they identify as repression and using an icon as unifier. This is also not new in the history of comics that have always served for multiple purposes. Recent examples of this might be what Henry Jenkins pointed out in his conference on May 15 2012 in Westminster University in London when he referred to the case of the quintessentially American superhero, Superman, that has been "re-framed as illegal alien" by activists who used his iconicity claiming that even him was taken from another planet to the United States where he was hired as a journalist.

Whereas in Argentina, the Kirchners used in their campaigns the famous 1950's character *El Eternauta* created by Oesterheld and Solano López. Néstor was transformed into "Nestornauta" while Cristina became "La Eternauta", since Oesterheld disappeared during the dictatorship; his character contributed to unify a party that pronounced itself against this repressive past.

In April 2011 during a conference held in London I was able to conduct a brief interview with Alejandro Jodorowsky. I asked him why he thought that comics were experiencing this revival and whether he thought this had to do only with Hollywood's multi-millionaire-and in the case of Moore's *V for Vendetta* (2006), pitiable- productions based on comics. According to Jodorowsky this phenomenon has to do also with a deeper cultural issue:

> Ideas take their time to root, to be accepted and understood. Moebius and I were among the creators of the graphic novel 30 years ago but it has taken years for people to get the message and this is why these comics are so popular nowadays. The same thing has happened to my films, for example *El Topo*, filmed more than 40 years ago, is being watched and understood today.

Moore seems to share Jodorowsky's views; he has declared the following about the Guy Fawkes masks phenomenon:

> I suppose when I was writing *V for Vendetta* I would in my secret heart of hearts have thought: wouldn't it be great if these ideas actually made an impact? So when you start to see that idle fantasy intrudes on the regular world… It's peculiar. It feels like a character I created 30 years ago has somehow escaped the realm of fiction. (Moore 2011 n.p.).

It is therefore clear that iconic characters consolidated in sequential narratives from pre-Hispanic deities and medieval jugglers to Superman, Guy Fawkes and El Eternauta, have found a very strong resonance in real life mobilizations. Any legendary character within the realm of comic books not only transcends because of its ability to consolidate a loyal audience but also because it condenses a set of values and dynamics directly linked to the socio-political context where it has been created.

2.3. Illegal United States Citizen in Mexico

Jessica Abel was born in 1969 in Chicago and published her first series in a comic called *Artbabe* that figured from 1992 to 1999, a few years later came the anthologies *Soundtrack* and *Mirror Window*. In 1998, she moved to Mexico City where she began writing the series *La Perdida* (2001-2005), which was awarded in 2002 with the Harvey Prize for 'Best new series.' So from a very early stage of her career, Abel has appeared in the United States comics scene as a successful author and a representative of her generation.

La Perdida is the story of Carla Olivares, daughter of Mexican father and United Statian mother, raised in Chicago, who travels for the first time to Mexico City. She is a young adult in her early twenties.

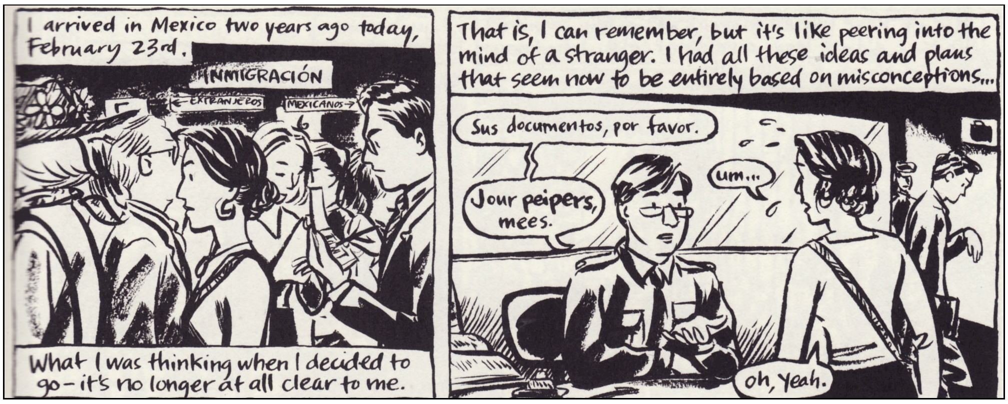


Figure 46. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 5).

The character of Carla appears right in the centre of the panel above. On top of her head are the signs pointing out the direction to clear the immigration control. Carla is standing facing to the left in the queue for “Extranjeros” [Foreigners]. She is in between what looks like a lady with a flowery hat, something that would suggest that this is the depiction of a character arriving on holiday, while the man behind her is wearing a suit and looking completely absorbed by his electronic diary. Carla is neither one or the other, from the very beginning she is represented as something in between, a foreigner who arrived in the country dressed with Mexican motives such as her jewellery, her artisanal rucksack crossing her heart, her Frida Kahlo hairstyle, and is surrounded by foreigners who, as the text reinforces the idea, have come with a clearer purpose than hers.

Although Abel lived for two years in Mexico City and was very well assisted while creating this novel, examples of unconscious iconic displacement can be spotted from the very first pages:

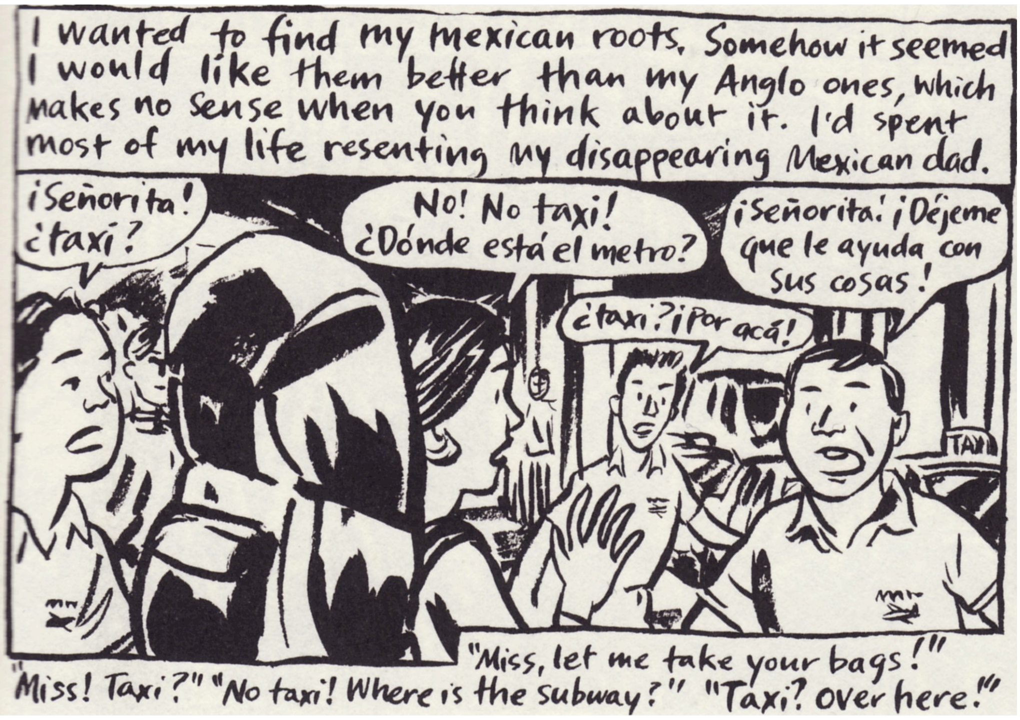


Figure 47. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 6).

The airport employee on the right who says: "¡Señorita! ¡Déjeme que le <u>ayuda</u> con sus cosas!" is not reproducing how a Mexican taxi driver would talk but how he is heard by a foreigner. The communicative goal of this speech balloon is for sure to express: "Déjeme que le <u>ayude</u> con sus cosas" [Let me help you with your bags] instead of what is written "Déjeme que le ayuda con sus cosas" [Let me that this helps you with your bags]. She replies in English saying: "No! No taxi!" as it is indicated by the use of a single exclamation mark but then she asks in Spanish: "¿Dónde está el metro?"

It is equally interesting to note that the translation suggests an order for the reading of the speech balloons, which goes from right to left, while the reader of the image is likely to go from left to right. Nevertheless, the sense of the conversation is not altered by the change of order. And the message remains exactly the same, a foreigner has arrived in town and she sees everything through alien eyes. I asked Nericcio what he thinks of Abel's narrative strategy and he replied: "Jessica Abel's work in *La Perdida* is fascinating because this is a sustained re-visioning of the "gente" through alien eyes." (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

During the first weeks of her stay in Mexico, Carla is installed in the apartment of her former boyfriend and compatriot Harry, a journalist who has spent some time living in Mexico. At the beginning, the protagonist devotes her days to typical tourist activities while Harry, increasingly fed up with her presence, tries to write his first novel.

Figure 48. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

Abel uses very clear Mexican cultural icons in order to successfully introduce multiple permeable boundaries in this comic book page. From a panoramic view of Teotihuacan (panel 1) or a touristy souvenir (panel 2) and a character following Burroughs steps trying to write a novel in Mexico (panel 4) while getting drunk with a local beer (panel 5) or the female character emulating

Frida Kahlo and defending her right to buy reproductions of pre-Columbian art (panel 6) to both of them accusing each other's artificiality: Harry thinks she is a fake tourist, Carla thinks he is nothing more than an alcoholic. They both know they can't take each other seriously (panel 7). And all of these intervening boundaries are brought into the living room of an apartment in the Condesa neighbourhood. This page is achieving Abel's aim of recreating scenes with a very few but key elements, as the author's sees it: "A style that implies more than it shows, and so, ironically, feels more "true" to the scene I want to draw than a style that is more specific. It seems to me that the reader's imagination is able to fill in the gaps more effectively than I ever could." (Abel 2007).

Although Carla and Harry are both foreigners coming from the same country and living in the same city, their social differences are transferred to Mexico where they are as different types of citizens as in the United States. Harry comes from a wealthy family, he speaks the local language and he has a college degree. In contrast, Carla comes from a lower socioeconomic background, she did not finish college, does not speak Spanish and do not know exactly why is she in Mexico. Their experience of the country is, from the very beginning, very distinct. In this case, their social disparities are displaced to a new context where they operate in different ways; for example, Carla manages to make some new friends but soon it becomes evident that they might not be the best influence for her. Among them there are a suspicious drug dealer and a rather unfriendly man born in the United States who refuses to speak English and who declares himself as a radical oppositionist.

Carla receives many warnings not only from Harry but from several characters that embody different social roles and allude to Mexico city's polyphony: intellectuals or artists living in the country, English teachers, and a few Mexican friends who alert her about the risks of interacting with people like Oscar, a rather naïf man who dreams of becoming rich and famous by just getting to the United States, and Memo, a pseudo leftist who is basically against everything.

This attempt to include a multiplicity of voices implies an immersion into the most complex "Babel's incoherencies," as the Argentinean anthropologist Néstor García Canclini calls it, asserting in his essay *Mexico: Cultural Globalization in a Disintegrating City*:

> For megacities like Mexico City the issue of what is said and what is left unsaid by urban subjects, and what sociology says about these subjects and what anthropology hears them saying, has recently been complicated. What happens when we cannot understand what a city is saying—when it becomes a Babel and when the chaotic polyphony of its voices, its dismembered spaces, and its scattered individual experiences dilute the meaning of the total discourse? (García Canclini 1995, 744).

So the series of voices heard by the main character are part of this "chaotic polyphony" that prevents the reader from finding a homogenised speech. Carla's first warning comes from a fellow expat who has been living in the country for a few years and seems to be more able to detect suspicious circumstances.

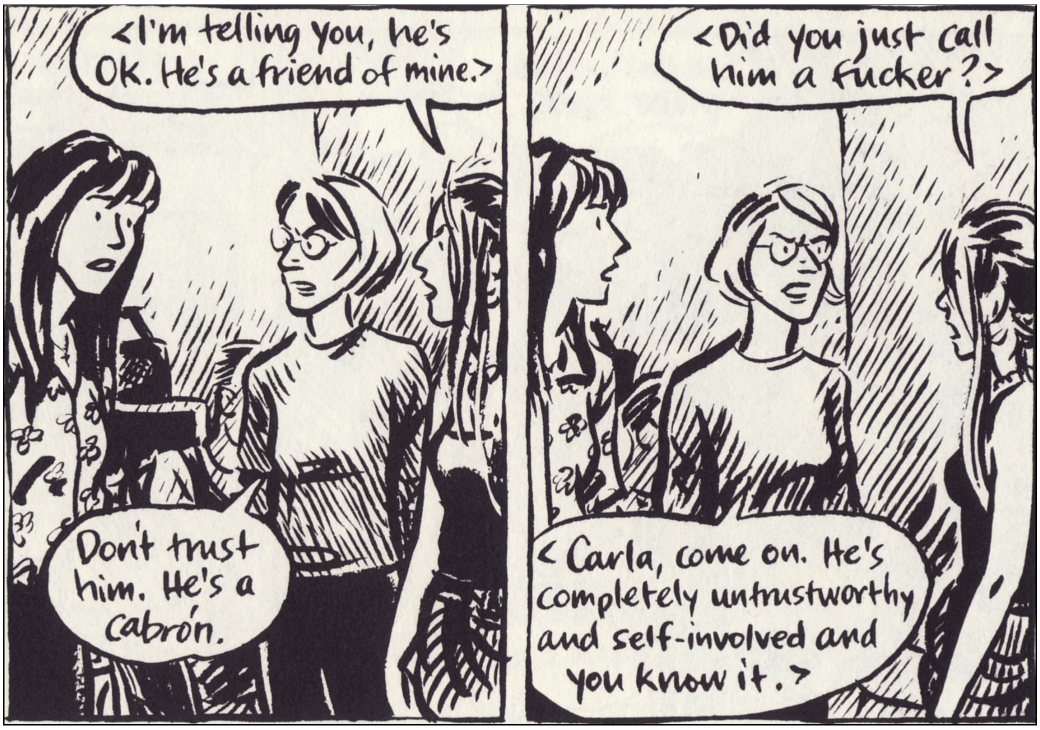


Figure 49. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 73).

A bilingual conversation is once more depicted by the use of arrow brackets and the word "cabrón" is used, once again, within the dialogue in "Spanish" (panel 1) before being immediately translated by Carla as "fucker" (panel 2). *La Perdida* is filled with localisms, idioms like this and customs that are completely related to Mexico City's life and culture. As Priego asserts: "I started working in this book reviewing her English, that is to say, making sure that the expressions she used for the characters speaking in Spanish were the most appropriate for a “chilango” [Mexico city resident].” (Priego 2011, n.p.).

A second wake-up call is made by one of the characters of the above panels, a Mexican friend who “reads” Memo’s resentment in a much more competent way than Carla, who does not seem to fully grasp or understand these warnings. Even when things start to move on and Carla begins to notice that she is being left on her own; one of the first signs of how she is entering a dangerous world all on her own appears when she loses her housemate:

Figure 50. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 86).

The final one is a warning by Rodrigo, Carla’s younger brother who visits her in Mexico and symbolizes her world of origin, asking her to be careful. This time she 'defends' her right to make her own choices in her new life in Mexico and claims to know exactly what she is doing. The narrative, however, also suggests that, internally, Carla starts to fear that she is not entirely safe. It is not the case of Carla being completely blind. I would argue that the character is deliberately choosing not to see the full picture of something presented in the narrative as the very obvious fact that she is getting in danger. This is clearly verifiable when she refers to her boyfriend Oscar:

Figure 51. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 29).

If, to Carla, Oscar is a “Latin lover” that will fulfil an essential part of her fantasy of being in Mexico; for Oscar, Carla is a gateway not only to the United States but to the world. This conflict illustrates clearly the issues of craving and aversion described on the section called Representing Mexico: Craving and Aversion. When Rodrigo asks her about him, Carla herself describes the ingenuity of her boyfriend as follows:

> He's got, like, this fantasy that he's going to be a DJ, but there's no way. He doesn't have hardly any records, but, I mean, that's not even the point. He doesn't even know what it means to be a DJ, except that people pay you to go to parties. And you get famous. (2006,118).

The Mexican characters that become Carla’s friend are indeed portrayed as very naïf. I asked Priego what his point of view was in relation to this issue and he commented the following:

> I do think that *La Perdida* could have been produced in not such a stereotypical way. I would have liked to see why these Mexican guys were the way they were and why this idiot who wished to become a DJ only had one record. The cultural differences are also contrasting, all the expats have got a job and a future and the Mexicans are lost: a DJ with no records or a

> pseudo-intellectual who devotes his time to complain about everything without doing anything. (Priego 2011, n.p.)

It is true that there are some “good” Mexican characters, including one inspired in the actual Ernesto Priego and named after him. Carla ends up, however, completely distanced from all the people that wanted to help her and warned her about Memo and Oscar. When her brother Rodrigo goes back home and Carla goes with him to the airport he gives her a present: a papier maché mini skull, a typical artisanal object made very popular by, but not exclusively, the Day of the Dead celebration. This “calaverita” [mini skeleton] is one of the most important symbolic supports of the novel. Wherever it appears some transition occurs at either the narrative, psychological or physical levels. Soon after, Carla bumps into Harry who she has not seen in months:

Figure 52. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 135).

Both characters have experienced a few significant transformations. Carla is now able to spontaneously speak in Spanish (panel 3). Significantly, the author doesn't seem to consider that it is necessary to translate into English what she is saying since it is obvious [Oh, I am sorry!]. She is now wearing very neutral Western contemporary clothes, which could be seen almost anywhere in the world, and her hair is loose. Harry has got a haircut too and a job as a journalist in Associated Press (panel 5). His apartment is, as he describes, better equipped. They talk about the people Carla has stopped seeing, like Sylvia, who was the first one to dislike Memo (panel 6), and one more friend, Greg, who has also cut his hair (panel 7). Everything in this page is about change, transition and transformation: from Rodrigo leaving (panel 1) and being in an airport to these two characters having abandoned their previous personas in order to be a more honest version of themselves. This is also the reason why they can talk to each other in the most amicable way.

A few weeks later, Carla's local friends begin behaving suspiciously up to the point when she doesn't really know when she is going to see them next; when they do show up, she feels invaded in her own place. Eventually she does begin to fear something is very wrong with their behaviour and asks herself: "Fuck. Me. What is going on?" (Abel 2006, 168), but she is still too blind to see it. One day Carla learns through the press that Harry, whom she has not seen again, has been kidnapped. Her friends keep on being suspicious up to the point that they even leave her completely on her own on New Year's Eve:

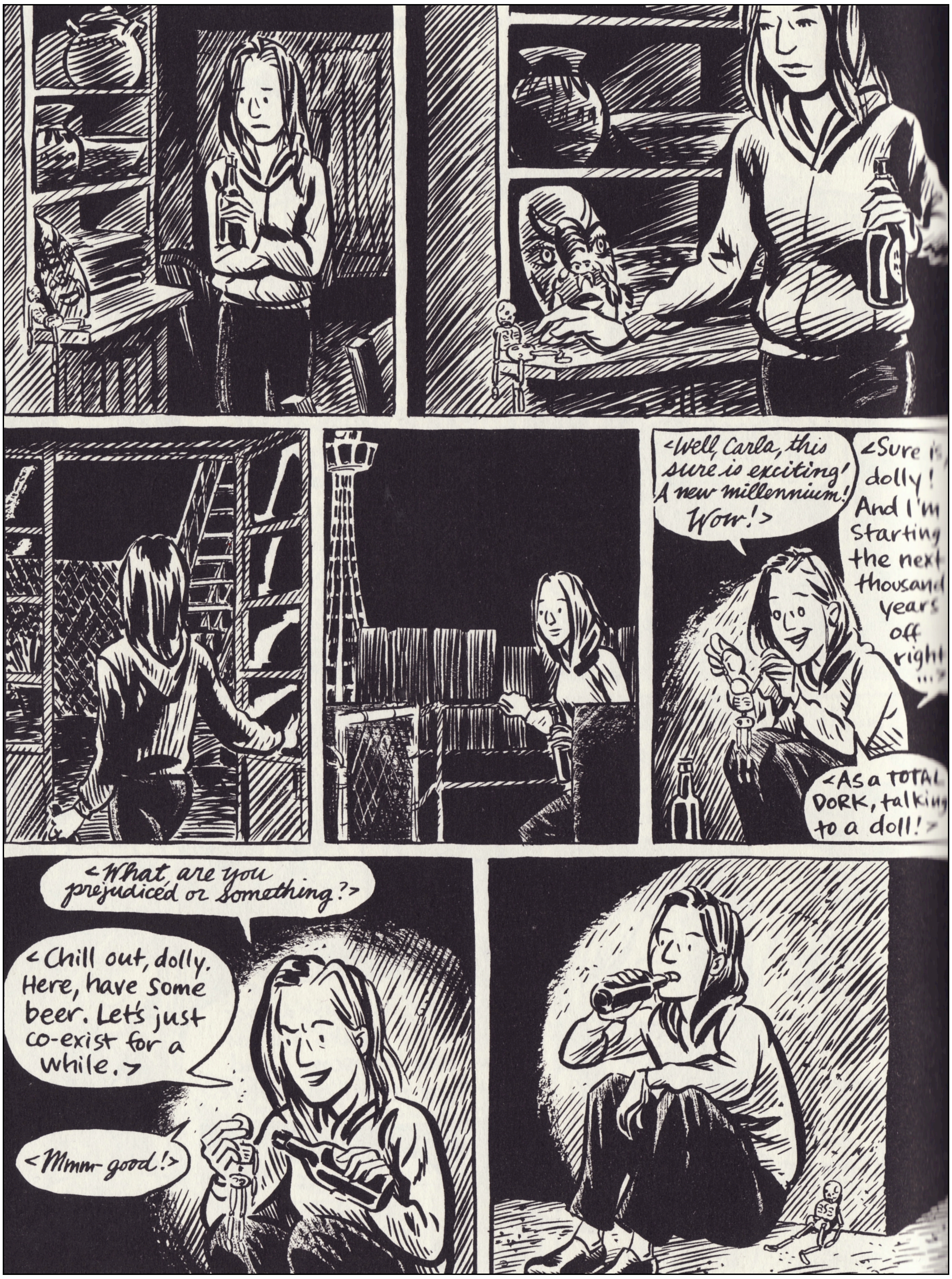


Figure 53. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 190).

Carla is drinking at home alone in the dark, there is a subtle transition when she grabs the little skeleton in one hand and her beer in the other (panel 2), then she goes upstairs when she starts a conversation with the doll. The change of typography grants the object a voice of its own and Carla's eyes are widened in order to show her delusion (panel 5); she is then left to wait (panel 6) without imagining what is about to show up. Her friends appear at her place having Harry as a hostage, they had held him captive for a month at another location:

Figure 54. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 192).

The panel above presents an almost perfectly symmetrical and polyphonic image offering key information. Demographic permeable boundaries are shown very clearly: on the foreground there are two United States citizens, being held captive by two characters with distinctively Mexican features. The iconic displacement is made evident by the fireworks in the background, which would normally suggest a festive atmosphere and the precise time, midnight: they do not match the violent action that takes place among the characters. Ray, the “Gringo Loco” [Crazy Gringo], looks fixedly at Harry, the hostage, and his central position in the picture makes him look as if he was orchestrating the operation. Harry and Carla are being held by two Mexican characters. In this wordless panel, the message conveyed is really powerful: Carla’s face shows confusion, Harry looks furious, both can’t talk, the three Mexicans are the oppressors, both of them physically hold the victims while Ray looks at them dominantly demonstrating that he is the intellectual author of this kidnap. I agree with Abel when she asserts: “My strongest point in drawing has always been my ability to show characters' nonverbal communication through facial expression and posture.” (Abel, 2006).

After a few days under vigilance, Carla manages to ask for help, policemen show up at her apartment and they all get detained while Harry is liberated. Carla is later deported back to her country and she is unwelcomed to visit Mexico ever again.

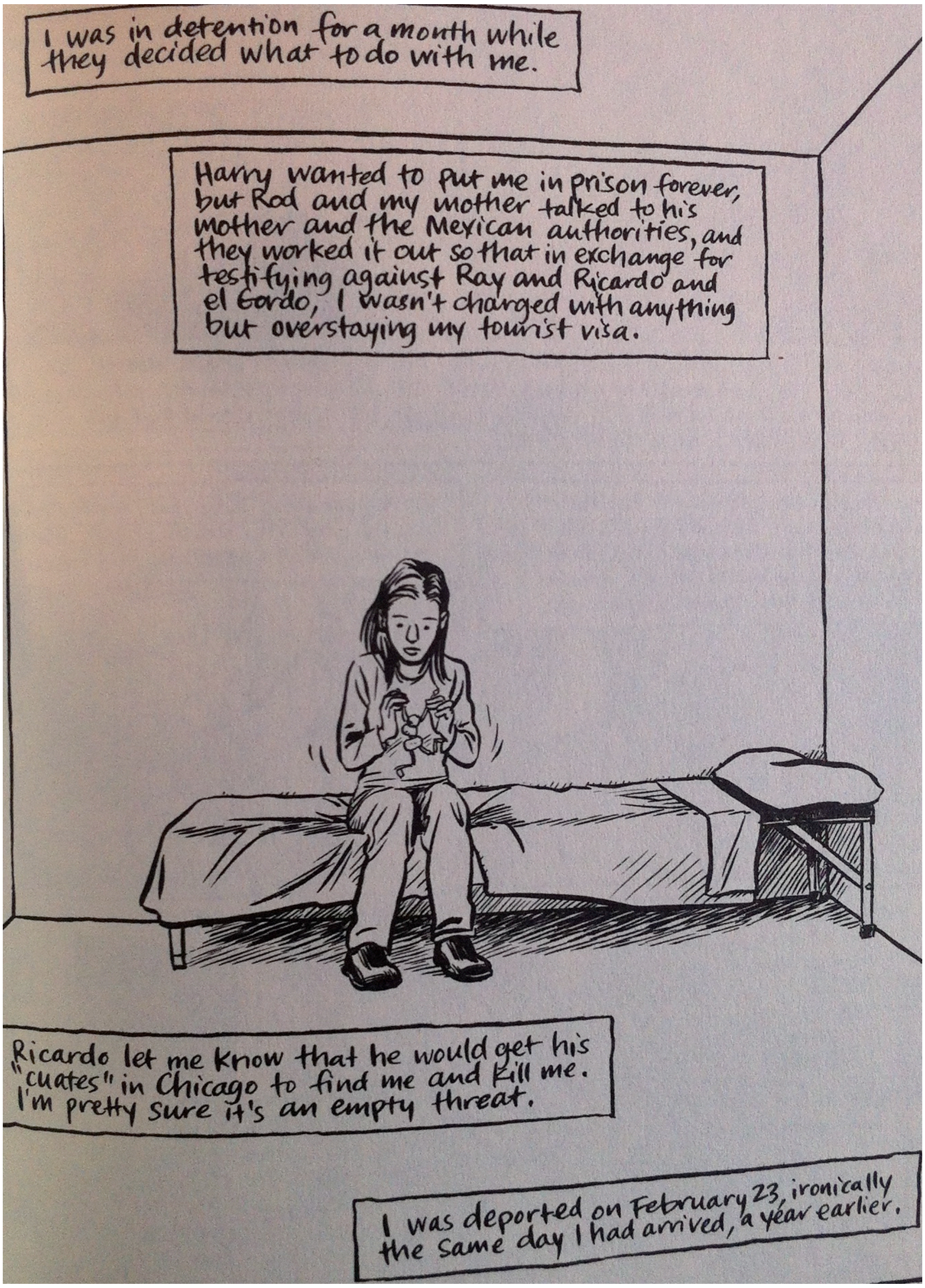


Figure 55. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 251).

In **Figure 55** the character appears represented playing with the papier maché skull that was given to her by her brother Rodrigo, which, as I pointed out, is one of the most important symbolic supports of the novel. Carla is "detained" in prison, awaiting the authorities' decision of what to do with her. The skull has to do, obviously, with death, not only a physical death but also the symbolic death of a young adult who is always aware of this continuous process of becoming “who she really is”. This is the moment in the narrative where Carla begins to detect that something has died: “a young person can hardly escape conceiving more consciously of the end of personal time: death itself, not only for others but for himself as well.” (Rayner 1992, 156)

In the following section I will explain a key aspect on the novel’s structure which will elaborate on the irreversible changes that the experience of Mexico have brought to Carla’s life.

2.3.1. The Inversion of Values

The narrative strategy of *La Perdida* is from beginning to end a case of a reversed situation. The alien and illegal migrant in Mexico is Carla, a United States citizen who has overstayed her tourist visa. She is also the non-Mexican citizen who, once back in Chicago, wonders around a Mexican neighbourhood experimenting a deep feeling of nostalgia and regretting not being able to travel to Mexico again. In other words, Carla is experiencing what Mexican migrants go through without being one of them. This is the central iconic displacement of the novel. Although Jessica Abel settled almost the whole novel in Mexico City, the representation of Mexican neighbourhoods in Chicago, like Pilsen, and the story alluding to an absent Mexican father who migrated to the United States tie the novel to the issues related to the north frontier.

Figure 56. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 3).

Those who know Chicago can decode this vignette starting from the word, or iconic sequence, “Pilsen”, which is the name of a very popular Mexican neighbourhood in that city. Anyone who has visited a Mexican town would know how to decode other similar icons (words-images) that are included in the panel, such as “elotes asados” and “tamales”, as these food carts are found in virtually every busy street in the country. I do not mean that a reader who is not aware of these details is least competent. I think that this reader will grasp, thanks to these details, an idea of what a Mexican neighbourhood in a great metropolis in the United States would look like. Finally, the word "cold" is not written but its meaning can be read in the clothing and the flushed faces of the characters.

It should also be added that there is an explicit intention on behalf of the author to immerse the reader in the cultural horizon of the "real" Mexico found by her character and witnessed with her own eyes, and in the way in which the character tries to replace that recent experience with a Mexico-inspired neighbourhood in Chicago, her hometown. In any case, this should be taken as a fragmentation of elements found in the streets that provide an experience of what the alluded environment might be like; even if it is realistically depicted, this is still a piece of fiction, as García Canclini states:

> With any urban issue-transportation, pollution, the role of street vendors-there exists such a diversity of opinions, even information, that it is difficult to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. Nowhere are common sense and ordinary language so much in need of epistemological criticism as in large cities: we cannot record the diverse voices of our informants without wondering how far they are *aware* of what they are saying and of its implications. (García Canclini 1995, 744).

According to the US Census Bureau criteria —described in detail in the section called Telenovelas and Vampires: Identifying the Local Foreigner — it would be politically and academically correct to refer to Carla, as a "Chicana". Such criteria, however, does not address a series of problems that arise from its schematic classification. A subject like Carla, for example, according to the story, never grew up in contact with the Mexican side of her family even though what she wants is to be Mexican and Latin American for that matter. She is a lost person in search of the lost object. And, in spite of her very honest effort to assimilate, she unconsciously insists on exposing herself as foreigner. And this is precisely what builds on the dramatic tension of the story.

La Perdida is not a comic book that could be catalogued as Chicano but it inevitable deals with this cultural aspect and is constantly in contrast with the use of some of the aesthetic resources of Chicano authors. For example, Carla's configuration, both physically and ideologically, does give the impression of a white United States citizen. And this is an evident contrast with the most famous Mexico-United States comic book characters, those of the Hernandez brothers, whom I mentioned previously, and specifically those of Gilbert. As Paul Gravett asserts: “Hispanic-Californian Gilbert Hernandez, his women are especially strong, sensual, and fully realized” (Gravett 2005, 13).

Differing from the Hernandez’ depiction of Chicano women, if there is something that is not seen in Carla is self-confidence. Nor she at all physically characterized as the stereotypical “voluptuous Latina” of the Hernandez brothers. Her brother Rodrigo, on the other hand, is not only fluent in Spanish — as he himself grew up in contact with his father— but his physical features suggest that he has inherited the Mexican gene that Carla simply does not have. In the foreground it is very evident that Rodrigo's dark eyes and hair as well as features make him much more “Latino” or “Chicano” than her sister without him even trying. Hence he doesn’t need to wear a *guayabera* or other folk garment, like the one Kuper refers to as mentioned in section titled Iconic Mexicanity, similar to those used by his sister in her insistence of "being" Mexican.

I also find relevant to add that the mains character’s transformation travels together with how different this comic book looks and feels at the beginning and at the end of it. Nericcio agrees with this point of view: “Jessica gets tired of her vision of Mexico, she gets tired of the book and it ends in fatigue, not just in catastrophe. Is like “I want to finish”. The beginning and the end of the book are like two different arts.” (Nericcio 2011, n.p.). This noticeable change has to do partly with the fact that *La Perdida* was initially created as a serial publication. But, according to Priego, it also has to do with other issues:

> The beginning is a bit tidier and then it turns a bit darker and more baroque. It has to do with what is happening in the story, which is actually getting uglier and uglier. But it also has to do with the fact of how long it took to create this comic: from 2001 until 2005 plus the review, correction and translation process. So these are five years of manual labour since almost everything in her style is done by hand. (Priego 2011, n.p.).

Once back in the United States the character of Carla recounts what has happened. As any character that has experienced a revelation or epiphany, she has learned a lesson and she is very much aware that she has crossed the point of no return. When she recalls the end of his days in Mexico, she experiences a deep sense of failure but she is also in possession of a knowledge that was completely lacking before.

Carla learns a lesson and grasps a clearer notion of how reality is like when a crime is committed in Mexico. According to Carla's understanding, it is still a crime, it is still wrong and there is a price that she must pay in result of her own bad choices. At the end of the entirely fictional novel she is deported to her country and describes the lesson she learnt as follows:

Figure 57. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 254).

The above panels are fragmented images of Chicago's public transport. This sequence creates an atmosphere that allows the reader to "experience" what it is like for the main character to be on board of this train –physically and metaphorically speaking— while observing people and reflecting on her experience in Mexico. It is noteworthy to mention all the urban references, so distinctive of Abel's style, enhancing quotidian life and ordinary moments: from people all dressed in winter clothes stating clearly that this space is Chicago and not Mexico, to a woman who frowns at a little girl (panel 1) or the child and the man sleeping (panels 2 and 4). In this sequence, the iconic displacement also falls on the reader: the panels on the right portray some of the characters seen in the left from a longer distance; for example, the woman with curly hair and glasses who appears talking to another woman (panel 1) is then represented again with her seat companion being blocked out of the picture by another person who seems to be a woman who reads what seems to be a magazine (panel 2), whereas, in the case of the person standing with a hand inside the coat's pocket (panel 3), she is latter represented seen from a different angle in the opposite side (panel 4). I think that this recreation of the constant movement and flow of people on board of a means of public transportation is directly linked to what the main character is saying in the narrative box, that is, her psychological flow revealing a narrative moment of anagnorisis. Carla's language is rich with the use of a very didactic vocabulary including concepts such as "judge", "rules", "knowledge", "good and bad", that are directly related to the loss of sense of herself and her place in the world but also with the acquisition of new knowledge: a full awareness of the effect that her actions and omissions have led to. Carla is indefinitely banned from visiting Mexico. And, although she went there to find herself she feels that she ruined the possibility of reconnecting with her origin and this is a consequence that she must pay.

2.4. Urban Displacement

Life Sucks is a short graphic novel created by a large group of people. It was written by two authors, Jessica Abel and Gabe Soria[2],illustrated by Warren Pleece[3] and coloured by Hilary Sycamore. Such collectiveness has produced a

---

[2] Gabe Soria is an author, blogger and a regular contributor of publications on popular culture and fan fiction including the comic book *Batman Adventures* (1992-1995), the music magazine *Mojo* and the now ceased cultural magazine *Arthur*. He is also a regular contributor of newspaper articles and cultural blogs.

[3] Warren Pleece is a British artist who was born in 1965 in Wiltshire. His first comic book was a self-publication created with his brother Gary Pleece in the late 1980's. He continued as a contributor for several magazines and as co-author with artists like Woodrow Phoenix for the series *Sinister Romance*. He has also worked in a number of different works for DC Comics and in 2008 he was invited to illustrate *Life Sucks.* A year

multifaceted comic book about a young vampire based in Los Angeles who hates his immortal existence and feels disgusted by merely hearing the word "blood". In an essay based on this graphic novel, Soria has suggested that *Life Sucks* is an evocation of his years as a young adult in Los Angeles: "Although *Life Sucks* is ostensibly set in modern day Los Angeles, part of me will always see it as occurring in the early-to mid-90s, when I was the same age as the characters in the book and, like them, making my way through the bleak and wonderful streets of L.A." (Soria 2008 n.p.).

Like Soria mentions, the novel is visibly infused by what could be the very quotidian life of thousands of people living in Los Angeles. Dave Miller, a young and white twenty-something, is trying to pull his act together in what can be a very challenging city for the young and unprivileged. As it has been shown in section titled "Telenovelas and Vampires: Identifying the Local Foreigner" he shares his home with Carl, an African American friend from high school. He does the night shift at a 24-hour convenience shop owned in Los Angeles by a Romanian immigrant and vampire, Lord Radu Arisztidescu. The latter needed a manager for all eternity and Dave, who never dreamed of this job, much less to be a vampire, just had the misfortune to ask for it. Almost every evening a group of young Goths gathers outside the shop. Among them there's Rosa, a young Mexican-American, for whom Dave sighs. She has a boyfriend, Alistair, who wears a cape, plastic fangs and calls Dave "peon" because he does not belong to the Goths' assumed vampiresque "lineage." Alistair, however, has not got a clue that Dave, the simple guy behind the counter, has the potential to develop the same supernatural powers that he unsuccessfully tries to emulate with a long cloak and excessive makeup.

Dave, who used to start his workday at 6:30 pm with a glass of tomato juice has not developed yet his vampire "potential" because he finds it so repulsive to feed himself on human blood that he only drinks plasma, for that reason he is always feeling weak and looks a bit flimsy. In contrast, his best friend and, remarkably virtuous young vampire, Jerome, who regularly feeds on human blood, is able to fly and to hypnotize people. Like Dave, Jerome also works at a 24-hour photocopying business that belongs to another Romanian vampire, friend of Radu. As if this were not enough, Dave has a vampire "brother", Wesley, who was also turned into a vampire by Lord Radu. Dave was

---

after his participation in *Life Sucks* he created the art for the graphic novel *Incognegro* written by Mat Johnson.

converted into a vampire because the good-looking, athletic and very rich Wes did not need to work at all and would rather spend the working evening surfing or organizing parties. To Radu's greatest disappointment, he didn't quite fit the bill for the supermarket job vacant so he had to find someone else, someone like Dave.

No matter how hard he tries, Wes fails to impress Dave. This bothers him so much that, when, after many attempts, Dave finally manages to go out on a date with Rosa, Wes finds its way into the scene and eventually steals the girl who, after some twists and turns, convinces Wes to bite her, becoming a vampire too. The very tragic fact that Rosa didn't foresee was that Wes would become her master. Eventually, happy to do a favour for his best employee, Radu commands Wes to release Rosa from his power and she turns into a very unusual case of an absolutely independent female Mexican vampire.

In this novel, the vampire's life is a hyperbolization of multiple feelings and situations experienced by a young adult who fails to emancipate and struggles in a metropolis whose inhabitants are highly conditioned by their socioeconomic status and their appearance. With a great sense of humour, irreverence and irony, this story highlights the impending change that has been generated in one of the United States largest and most diverse cities because of the coexistence and assimilation of several ethnic groups.

Rosa is somehow a metaphor of the new generation in the United States because she represents a young Latina with the challenge of being completely free in a world still unknown to her. It is also significant that Rosa gets her first job as a waitress thanks to a good friend and fellow vampire 'sister' of Asian descent.

Life Sucks offers an interesting contrast and a rather playful approach. As it has been stated before, the sense of "tragedy" that some of the characters experiment at different stages of the narrative are mocked in a *telenovela* tone and style. The following page shows Dave arriving at work:

Figure 58. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 9).

In the figure above, the day shift guy called Mouktar, a name of Lebanese origin relatively well known in the United States, is anxiously waiting for Dave to arrive (panel 1). In this page he reveals that he is on probation (panel 2) and is shown bearing an ankle bracelet (panel 3). In spite of having been put through the court system he is not afraid to shoplift a bit (panel 5). He plans to go to Mexico as soon as he is freed from the bracelet that ties him to his couch during the night and to his job in the "Last Stop" during day. He will not be able to do it because his boss, also a vampire, will bit his head off (2008, 31). As can be seen in this page, the urban references to Los Angeles are not precisely flattering: from the traffic jam that Dave skips on his bike on the way to work to tiny but meaningful details such as the plastic cup left in the sidewalk and the waste bin (panel 1). Warren Pleece has stressed how relevant these graphic suggestions are in the development of the story: “For *Life Sucks*, it was important to convey the mundane backdrop of Dave's life, so, rather than watch and rip-off loads of vampire-related stories, it was more important to get L.A. right in all its parking lot glory” (Pleece, 2008). The “Last Stop” is a place where some people are destined to remain: “I’ll only be here for all eternity.” (2008, 9) murmurs Dave to himself as he looks at Mouktar going home. In this case the permeable boundaries have to do with the fact that, the idea of going to Mexico is associated to freedom, to being able to escape from authority, to not having to deal with a meaningless job, and to a “cool” everyday life style.

This page also shows demographic boundaries, it is an example of how, all throughout the novel, multicultural elements (such as the Arabic background of this character) and determinant social factors (such as law, the system and freedom) are key points to the narrative’s development and, moreover, to the novel’s structure. What the two cases have in common is the action of escaping provided by crossing a political border and a cultural frontier. More important, however, is the image created in the collective imaginary about the longed for territory. It does happen often that, the migrant's expectations are not always met as they go looking for an idealized world that doesn't really exist. But it could also happen that the idealization of a foreigner coming from a developed country would allow him to encounter exactly what he is looking for. And this is what the cultural frontier is all about: a juxtaposition of expectations, icons of a different life that enable migrants to reach the reality they are longing for. Mouktar is also creating a reality. This is not the Mexico a Mexican would see. By this I do not mean that all Mexicans share the same perceptions of their own country. But the fantasies of bars open all night in Baja California are not necessarily shared by Mexican nationals who do not necessarily find life there as mysterious, striking and exotic.

Displacement, on the other, hand, is at the heart of the novel. Vampires are displaced beings in many ways: they are only able to go outside when is dark, they can’t eat, they do not age and they are very hard to kill. On top of that, Dave was already a bit of a displaced member of society to start with. So that he is displaced twice. This is how the ordinary routine for a displaced-displaced young vampire would start:

Figure 59. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 5).

The graphic novel begins in the darkness of Dave Miller's messy room. Although this would appear to be a typical morning wake up call, the alarm clock set at 6.30 pm along with the announcer's voice talking about the evening jam in "smoggy" L.A. (panel 2) reveals the opposite. The reader is therefore immediately immersed in the main character's reverse reality that sets a precedent for the rest of the comic: all action will be taking place during night time; so, when everyone is heading back home, Dave Miller is getting up for another night shift at a 24 hour convenience shop.

The onomatopoeia "Click!" (panel 2) enables the transition from stillness into action and works together with the broadcast speech balloon. As Will Eisner asserts: "The comics medium does not have sound, music, or motion so this requires readers to participate in the acting out of the story" (1985, p.57). The reader "hears" the alarm clock clicking on, then "listens" to the announcer and finally sees Dave's hand shutting the radio off (panel 3). Thanks to the use of suspension marks in both at the beginning of the first speech balloon and at the end of the second one, the reader knows that these are fragments of a program. As for what it is being said, the reader is able to identify two voices: that of a male, belonging to "Gino Michelini", who is located at the radio station and that of a female, "Lisa Neville", who is on a helicopter, "From up here in the sky" (panel 3), reporting on the traffic. The narrative trusts, as Eisner pinpoints, "the reader's life experience" (1985, 57) to supply, for instance, not only these voices but sound effects such as the noise by the helicopter's helices or maybe the radio station music background.

It only takes two panels, and one slightly competent reader, to bring L.A.'s urban chaos into the room. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the novel published in 1897 that has driven most of modern vampire fiction, Count Dracula is an elegant old man who lives in a castle with "extraordinary evidences of wealth" (1993, 13). The first night that his London guest, Jonathan Harker spends there, Count Dracula tries unsuccessfully to have him appreciate the "music" made by the howling wolves out in the woods and he finally observes: "Ah sir, you dwellers in the city cannot enter into the feelings of the hunter." (1993, 13).

In fact, having to hunt is arguably the thing that Dave Miller hates the most about his newly acquired vampirism. He is in that sense more similar to Jonathan Harker than what he could ever be to Count Dracula. He finds the idea of killing and eating human fresh blood repulsive, that's why he is not able to fully develop and command his vampire skills such as flying or hypnotizing. In comparison to other new vampires like him, Dave is rather inept. So from the very first page, the myth of the vampire is the parodied text by presenting this urban, modest and “vegan” creature living in a most definitely unrefined habitat. If, like I said before, vampires are displaced beings, Dave Miller is displaced twice since he categorically rejects to become a killer and, because of his socioeconomic condition, he is not entitled to enjoy a life of power and luxury either. How has Dave found himself in this non—escape situation? He is obliged to serve for all eternity to his vampire master Lord Radu Arisztidescu, aka Radu, a Romanian immigrant, and owner of the convenience store where he was unlucky enough to ask for a job just a couple years before:

Figure 60. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 28).

The black grid and the uneven frames of this page let the reader know that this is a narrative flashback. Radu's foreign accent is reproduced by onomatopoeic speech balloons (panel 1) and is also emphasized by the words in bold. In addition, this sequence exemplifies how Radu's speech is continuously fluctuating from the way in which he associates himself with being an immigrant, who carries on the traditions and millenary wisdom brought from his homeland, and the way in which he also identifies himself as an assimilated United States citizen who asserts to believe in building equity and providing opportunities for young people (panel 1). In contrast, Dave's innocence is supported by how smart he is dressed for what he thinks would be a job interview; the way he holds his tie nervously and how he is expecting to fill forms and go through an official hiring procedure are particularly revealing (panel 3).

There is a careful balance in the appearance of the characters. This page is in fact everything but ceremonious, let alone terrifying. While Dave crosses the threshold with his childlike grin (panel 6) the only object the reader can spot, as a symbolic support, is a coffeemaker. It is not even shown how Radu bites Dave's neck; only a corner of the microwave to the left and a detail of the fridge to the right can be seen (panel 7). Nevertheless, the reader has got enough information to distinguish that the speech balloon on the left is Dave's frightened "oooooowwww!" while the one on the right is Radu's evil "Blah ha ha!" which is exactly the same thing this character had just said in the previous panel speech balloon (panel 6). Pleece recognizes that the hardest part for him was to keep the story visually interesting in such an ordinary setting:

> After drawing countless shelves in the Last Stop stacked with cigarettes, cereal, etc., I vowed to draw my next project in a desert. Also, there's a lot of dialogue when it's all about the dialogue, but that's the challenge sometimes; getting character subtitles across in those scenes is just as rewarding and important as a great big splash pages and it pays off with the end result. (Pleece, 2008 n.p.).

So even the turning into vampire is demystified by occurring in a rather dull and mundane place and context. The artists of this book are proposing an imaginative way of representing vampires. In other words, this is a very old topic in fiction depicted by using what Elizabeth Rosen describes in her essay "The Narrative Intersection of Image and Text: Teaching Panel Frames in Comics" as following:

> There is a tendency for readers who come from literary backgrounds to read over design, as though the artwork existed only to render the plot visible and move the

> protagonists from place to place, while readers with design backgrounds often see the art as existing in a narrative void, an end in itself. Yet in the best instances, the design of a comic is inseparable from the narrative. Students may rely at first on either the text or pictures to tell them what is happening in a story and ignore completely the structures that are used to join the two, especially the panel frame. I emphasize the if pictures and words are the grammar of comics, then panel design is the syntax, that "the way the frame is used also establishes our relation to the world being presented" (Barker 11). (160, 2009).

So thanks to the panelling of this comic book page, the authors have made it believable that a vampire with such a disappointing start leads a rather uninteresting life. I think the subtext here is not too far from reality. If something is distinctive and will be remembered of this period in the history of the world, but particularly of California is how it has become much more difficult for a young person today to turn into an emancipated adult than what this was like for the previous generation. So, comics, fictional and fantastic as can be, are very informative windows to see through and find out more about the context where they have been produced.

Since that day, the only quotidian exciting moment Dave has found in his role as assistant manager at the "Last Stop" is when the nearby juice bar, popular among young Goths, closes and they all pop into the shop for snacks like nachos and "Sanguinella", a "blood orange juice imported from Italy" (2008, 17). The Goth squad includes a Mexican girl, Rosa: "Wow, you're right, she **is** hot"(2008, 21) Dave's vampire friend Jerome —and employee of a 24 hour photocopying shop "Kwik Kopy" — admits the first time he sees her. However, to Dave's misfortune, Rosa shows up accompanied by her outlandish boyfriend:

Figure 61. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 18).

Jerome's gesture drawing attention into "**this** jackass" and the onomatopoeic "Ding-a-ling" of the entry alert chime (panel 1) pave the way to the pseudo-vampire ceremonious appearance. The visual elements of the character: dyed purple hair, black eyeliner, long tunic and dark gloves work together with his evincive, histrionic speech. In addition, while Alistair is a fairly popular name in the UK it is not very widespread in the United States all of the elements used in the construction of this character are aimed to pinpoint him as a misplaced poseur.

Iconic displacement here is therefore very clear: while the fake vampires are dressed in elaborated black gowns and drink this imported simulated blood, the real vampires, dressed like any other small business employees, look at them from the till and are left unpleasantly surprised, in the case of Dave, and disgusted, in the case of Jerome (panel 7). My reading of this page is that it summarizes the novel's posture on vampire fiction; Jerome and Dave are looking at two characters that seem so fake that they, as real vampires, do not find themselves represented at all by those wannabes.

So a key point in *Life Sucks*, verifiable in this page, is that it distances itself from other very popular contemporary fiction inspired in vampires and addressed to young people such as the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* —aired from 1997 to 2003— or Stephanie Meyer's best-selling series *Twilight* —published from 2005 to 2008— because of the high dose of self-criticism revealed by the characters. In 2007, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was continued as a comic book in which one of the enemies that Buffy is after is a vampire called Twilight, a clear allusion to Meyer's works that, by that time, had turned immensely popular among teenagers all around the world.

While in *Life Sucks* there are also deliberate allusions to fan fiction, the use and awareness of several clichés is intended to question such mechanisms and conventions that are not exclusively related to vampire fiction but also to comedy, cinema and television. This is what enables the book to build its poetics with a widely open approach. Moreover, Dave is not portrayed as an empowered and extremely good-looking young man, quite the opposite. The book is in fact named after Dave's extremely uncool existence. Dave's life wasn't fantastic before becoming a vampire and it is still pretty boring afterwards. And, by the end of the book, the character is without a doubt transformed but in a very down to earth way. In addition, the characters themselves openly mock any attitude that would relate them to other popular vampires. For instance, when Dave tells Jerome that he might be in love with Rosa he replies: "Oh man. A vampire pinin' away for a mortal. How pathetically Anne Rice can you get?." (2008, 56).

Anne Rice, United States born author of *The Vampire Chronicles*, published the bestselling series from 1976 over the course of 27 years. I think all of these humorous hints so recurrent in the story communicate a self-critical and reflective approach on popular culture and fan fiction on behalf of the authors. *Life Sucks* is —as a whole work of fiction inspired on vampires— built on a permeable boundary foundation where crossed references, intertextuality and criticisms are shown continuously. And, as it has been mentioned before *Life Sucks* adds something innovative to the vast universe of vampire fiction by finding a new form for a well-known topic.

In addition, behind the well-documented dialogues of the characters speaking about vampire novels or allusions to films such as Tod Browning's *Dracula*, released in 1931 and interpreted by the Hungarian actor Béla Lugosi (2008, 107), in this fragment I recognize Gabe Soria's broad knowledge on popular culture. An example of Soria's writing style taken from an article published in *The Guardian* where he comments on a New Orleans based television show named *Treme* can be very illustrative:

> Inevitably, after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast, Hollywood came calling. There were incisive documentaries (Spike Lee's *When The Levees Broke*), earnest independents, (*Low And Behold*), and ham-handed Hollywood thrillers, *Déjà Vu*. New Orleans has also hosted college sex comedies, 3-D horror movies and more, every one of them injecting much-needed money into the local economy. But for projects set in New Orleans, authenticity and fidelity to the spirit of the city have been short in supply. The main offender: a cops-with-problems drama called *K-Ville*. Lasting for one seemingly endless season, it ladled policier clichés on top of New Orleans clichés, creating an almost toxic mix. (Soria, 2010 n.p.).

I think Gabe Soria's encyclopaedic writing style with multiple references to different programs and his appreciations of their impact in the audience is fruitfully introduced in *Life Sucks* as a key element in the speech. From Jerome's witty jokes, to the vampire masters discussing on actors or Rosa's allusions to cinema history and Wes' informed conversation when wanting to impress her as can be seen in the following example:

Figure 62. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 111).

I find this page very useful in order to understand the game that is being played by the characters all throughout the novel. It is the game of make-believe. By being so well documented, Rosa is some sort of a vampire expert.

Dave calls her a geek, and deservedly so (panel 1). There is also a double language: in the first two panels the reader can only see the back of the two main characters but what they both are saying reveals a lot, not necessarily of who they really are, quite the opposite, who they are not but would like to be. Why is Dave buying popcorn? To look like a mortal who is actually able to eat. Why is Rosa going on and on about the history of the *Vampirus* trilogy? Because she aspires to be a vampire herself. It is Rosa who should be bearing the popcorn and Dave who should be teaching her a thing or two on vampirism —if he wasn't a 'vegan' and could therefore perform as a real vampire. And who is hiding behind Rosa (panel 4) and Dave's speech balloon? (panel 5): "Wes?!". He has changed his surfer t-shirt for a black long sleeved shirt and a golden necklace, all this transformation done in order to win her over. So the words "Qué mentiroso" ["What a liar"] (panel 7) resonate in every single panel of this page. It is worthy of note that Rosa expresses her disbelief in Spanish, the spontaneous use of this expression manifests exactly who she is, where does she come from and how her ethnic background can't be hidden. Thus, this page is another clear example of how characters choose to turn themselves into permeable boundaries, where their "real" identity is interspersed with how they would like to come across according to who are they with.

As for Dave and Wes, the United States Census Bureau would classify them both as "white" people since they would both fit the bill for the following definition: "**White.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian" (2010). But in spite of sharing a racial classification, their social conflict is colourfully depicted all along the narrative. For most part of the book Wes is dressed as a surfer while Dave appears wearing his polo shirt uniform. That is, Wes spends most of his time in leisure while Dave needs to work in order to make a slightly decent living. The following sequence is a very illustrative example where, while driving his six-cylinder car, Wes has run over Dave who was riding his bicycle:

Figure 63. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 35).

There is one individual riding an eco-friendly bike to get to work versus another individual driving a sports car emitting massive amounts of CO2 and contributing to the night traffic jam only because he has nothing to do but showing off. This page is a compound of dichotomies: leisure versus work, ecology versus pollution, threat versus indifference, wealth versus hardship, useful versus useless. Splitting leisure and work is what creates the social conflicts of the characters in this novel and such conflict is summarized in the central panel of this page (panel 5). I consider the teeth to be a metaphor of a life condition and of how it wouldn't be possible for a rich boy such as Wes to exist without the support of a working class represented by Dave. I think both characters embody a contradiction explained by Doreen Massey as follows:

> It is really important that issues of dispossession are understood in terms of class as well as migration and ethnicity. Much of what has been written about dispossession recently has been specifically about migration. But a lot of dispossession can happen without major migration. It's basically class dispossession, a historical process (…) first as the dispossession of your land with the disappearance of the commons, and then dispossession of your labour, because the only thing you can do is offer it as labour power. I would like to insist that dispossession can happen without our moving. It's not only about migration. (56, 2012)

There is a dysfunctional relationship between Dave's miserable —and eternal— job and Wes' boring leisureliness. Thanks to the symmetry of this page, multiple readings can be made without altering its central meaning (panel 5).

One of them is splitting the page in columns and by reading them horizontally, the same basic elements can be found:

Dave holds the handlebars of his broken bike while Wes stands next to his car (panels 2, 7, 9)

Wes is left silent by Dave's despising words (panels 3, 4, 5)

Wes tries to approach Dave in a friendly way and is furiously rejected (panels 1, 6, 8)

A second reading would follow two peripheral triangles. The first one with three almost equal panels:

Dave holds the handlebars of his broken bike while Wes stands next to his car (panels 9, 2, 7)

Wes tries to approach Dave in a friendly way and is furiously rejected (panels 8, 1, 3)

And the third one:

> Wes tries to approach Dave in a friendly way and is furiously rejected (panels 1, 2, 7, 8)
>
> Wes is left silent by Dave's despising words (panels 5, 4, 3)

In spite of the multiple allusions to deep social conflicts and economic divisions that can be found in this book, it never lacks a remarkable sense of humour that makes it impossible to victimize the characters. The following pages are a good example of this:

Figure 64. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 50).

Figure 65. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 51).

In **Figure 64**, hyperbolic details such as the enormous hole in Dave's chest that makes him look as if he has been shut with a bazooka —not just a "**gun**" (panel 2)— and the enormous amount of blood spilt in the counter, the floor and his shirt as well as the cigarette and tobacco packages scattered all over provide the information of what happened just before: someone came into the shop, shoot Dave who fell over the products on the counter and was left on the floor while the thieve emptied the cash register. And while Dave is lying on the floor helpless, thinking that he will "die", Radu is perplexed looking fixedly at the empty register and the word "**money**" is the only one in bold.

The contrast with what is being said in the next page is not casual. I find that all of what Radu says to Dave is carrying a great weight in the narrative. Even if it's true that Dave wasn't born in the most privileged condition and that he has not had it easy, it is also made evident that he still needs to learn —just like any other young man— how to fight back, to develop his "great strength" (panel 3) to "get up off of za floor" (panel 4) to stop being a "crying baby!" (panel 5) and therefore a "disgraceful" (panel 6) apprentice.

In addition, Dave also needs to learn how to defy domination. If Radu is the icon of authority and Dave is the icon of a young apprentice in the path of learning how to become skilful and self-sufficient; there is another easy to spot icon called Merle, a long-haired, tattooed vampire who rides a motorcycle — and killed his master more than one hundred years before. He is the emblematic rebel. And he is constantly encouraging Dave to confront the authority and scarring Wes away for him. Vampires in *Life Sucks* are still part of a system. They do need to earn money and pay for their drinks or their means of transportation whether if it's a bike like Dave's, a 240 horsepower sports car like Wes' or Merle's red motorcycle. So Dave also needs to learn how to become a "Do-It-Yourselfer!" With the appearance of a character like Merle, it is implied that, even if it is not possible for young vampires to choose where, when and to what master they'll be "born"; they still count on the ability to choose in order to transform their immediate reality.

Figure 66. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 74).

By the end of the novel Dave will get to be in charge of a new store in "Pico". According to "Mapping L.A." an online resource published by *Los Angeles Times*, with information from the United States Census Bureau, Pico Union is one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. The population by ethnicity is as follows: 85.4% —Latino, 7.6% —Black, 3.0% —Asian, 2.9% —White, 1.1% —Other (2009).

So the development of the character and his achievements are still within the realm of the ordinary. The comic is suggesting that Dave will still remain an "outcast" as a white man working in a predominantly Latino neighbourhood. Unlike the *Twilight* main characters, by the end of the book, Dave and Rosa are not happily married. And Dave's many achievements such as learning how to hunt, getting a haircut or being promoted as manager of the

“Last Stop” new branch seem to be entirely plausible. And, by doing all of these, Dave is finally in command of his vampire powers and strength. As for Rosa, she is turned into a rare but not impossible case of a master-free vampire, an independent, self-sufficient Latina seems to resonate with the current social shifts and the only way for her to fully emancipate is to “break” her family ties by achieving economic independence. So Rosa will be working as a waitress, not a very glamorous job, but a safe way to gain a fixed salary.

So both characters belong to a working class milieu, they have notgot Wes’ dream house by the beach, but they both seem to be freer than him by having found a path to sustain themselves. It is the duty of the reader to imagine what will the eternal vampire existence may hold for these characters. How will this multi-ethnic context transform the current social disparities? If ever.

A very similar aspect of this novel development and ending that shares with *La Perdida* is that it unfolds a young character who has learnt precious information. In a way, this is a coming of age story, a “buildungsroman”, exploring the new world of adulthood metaphorically depicted as the character’s newly acquired vampire existence or, in the case of Carla’s character, a foreign country. In the interview Nericcio conceded me, he responded to a question agreeing on the presence of this common topic of these two comics : “A stranger in a strange land. Two of the most classic forms of a novel. Is the coming of age story and the stranger in a strange land put together. You are coming of age in the alien territory. That’s a good recipe for telling a story. If you’re gonna make a movie, there’s your plot.” (Nericcio 2011, n.p.)

Nevertheless, *La Perdida* is not the only graphic novel influencing the developing of this plot and its aesthetic canon. In the following pages I will elaborate on other influences that are visible within this comic book.

2.4.1. Transformable Cultural Icons

In addition to the influence of Abel’s and Soria’s past works that has been pinpointed in this section, I would like to cite the case of the comic book or “graphic mystery” titled *Incognegro* (2008) illustrated by Pleece, the artist of *Life Sucks*, and written by Mat Johnson. Set in the 1930’s, this is the story of a “mulato” journalist, Zane Pinchback, who looks almost entirely like a white man. He is therefore able to witness public executions of African-Americans taking place in the South of the United States where he gathers precious information for his column “Incognegro” published in a New York-based newspaper.

Figure 67. Johnson, Matt and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Incognegro* (New York: Vertigo, 18).

When Zane looks at the mirror he finds a juxtaposed series of images that build him and therefore explain and vindicate his cause and existence. He can clearly see that his own physiognomy can be worn just like a costume (panel 1). Zane is also able to recognize that he embodies his father and mother, which are the archetypes of the abuser and the abused (panel 2). Very much in the line of the classic United States superhero who intertwines his cause with a cause for the entire nation he makes the most of his "superpower": invisibility which is protected by the country's flag (panel 3). It is very interesting that Zane determination is encouraged by the magic of someone who is not only a woman but often labelled as the first African-American millionaire. Madame C.J. Walker is the name adopted by Sarah Breedgay who was born in 1867 in Louisiana and developed a range of beauty products for black women that soon became highly demanded by people all over the United States. Thanks to her success, Madame C.J. Walker was able to train hundreds of women in order to become hair and beauty specialists. She died in 1919, roughly two decades before the narrative present of this fictional comic book.

I therefore find it very relevant to pinpoint that in this comic book the authors have recuperated a figure that most have been very present in the collective thought of people fighting for equity during this period. So it is C.J. Walker, the woman who set the first example of how to become a self-made millionaire in the United States, who provides Zane with a "magic" tool to keep his "super secret" safe (panel 4). The cultural icons presented as Zane's most powerful arms are his typewriter on the left and Madame C.J.'s determination represented by the beauty product in the box situated next to the mirror (panel 5).

The result is the making of this sort of ethnic Robin Hood who uses his whiteness for empowering the black. What I find most interesting about this page is that by introducing this one simple iconic reference the authors are clearly indicating that within this historical context, there was a revolution that was already taking place and it was a woman born in the periphery who, to a large extent, had started it. Zane describes his tactic as follows:

> That's one thing that most of **us** know that most white folks do not. That Race doesn't really exist. Culture? Ethnicity? Sure. Class too. But **race** is just a bunch of **rules** meant to keep us on the bottom. Race is a **strategy**. The rest is just people **acting**. Playing roles. That's what white folks never get. They do not think they have **accents**. They do not think they eat **ethnic** foods. Their music is **classical**. They think they're just **normal**. That they are the **universal**, and that everyone else is an odd **deviation** from form. That's what makes them so easy to **infiltrate**. (Johnson, Pleece 2008, 19).

The words in bold, as they appear in the book, reveal the character's main discovery. By learning how to play by the rules of an imposed game he has managed to infiltrate in the world where whiteness is performed and, as Butler asserts this "is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act… a "doing" rather than a "being" (1990, 60).

The reason why I find so relevant to mention the case of *Incognegro* is not only because of the obvious fact that one of his authors is Warren Pleece, the same illustrator of *Life Sucks*, but also because the topic could be transferred to Rumanian and Latino immigrants in Los Angeles, vampires in the human world and *indigenismo* in Latin America. Eduardo Galeano illustrates it this way:

> En 1492, los nativos descubrieron que eran indios, descubrieron que vivían en América, descubrieron que estaban desnudos, descubrieron que existía el pecado, descubrieron que debían obediencia a un rey y una reina de otro mundo y a un dios de otro cielo, y que dios había inventado la culpa y el vestido y había mandado que fuera quemado vivo quien adorara al sol y a la luna y a la tierra y a la lluvia que moja (Galeano 2012, 225).
>
> [In 1492, the native Indians discovered that they were Indians, they discovered that they were living in America, they discovered that they were naked, they discovered that there was sin, they discovered that they owed allegiance to a king and a queen of another world and to a god of another heaven, and they discovered that god had invented guilt and clothing and he had ordered that those who adored the sun, the moon, the earth and the rain that falls should be burned alive]

It is interesting to note that Warren Pleece has illustrated two novels that demonstrate in two very different fictional cases: Butler's perspective of identity and performativity, Nericcio's concept of rentable skins and semiotic costumes, Galeano's vision of the discoveries by the discovered, and last but not least, that cultural icons are unstable, transformable and that such transformation depends on the permeability of the boundaries intervening in its context. *Life Sucks* and *Incognegro* are both illustrative of two cultural frontiers that have shaped and shifted in different times of history the mutant and constructed concept of Americanness.

2.5. I ♥ Oaxaca

Peter Kuper's journal is set in the colonial city of Oaxaca, a cultural and creative hub of the country with a rich pre-Hispanic heritage but also within one of the poorest states filled with tensions between the teacher's union and the government, among other political issues. Kuper[4], a political cartoonist, fled to Mexico in 2006 due to what he called his excessive workload and almost unbearable daily routine partly exacerbated by the tyranny of President George Bush (Kuper 2008, 10). The city of Oaxaca seemed like an ideal destination to disconnect from the political life and give his daughter an international experience in a peaceful environment. In the interview he conceded me I ask him about what other options did he consider and what were his criteria for finally choosing Oaxaca. Kuper replied:

> I have a daughter and my wife and I wanted her to learn a second language. Spanish is a perfect choice after Mandarin-Chinese. So, we looked around for different places where we might live. We decided that, since we were living in a big city, New York, we should live somewhere that were smaller. We went to Spain and it seemed like very expensive, we thought Mexico City is too big; so we visited Oaxaca a couple of times and it was just a lucky guess as it turned out to be so perfect. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

Nevertheless, neither he nor his wife counted on the fact that shortly after their arrival they would witness seriously violent events when the teacher's union strike exploded and a brutal repression from the government was shown in return. As Kuper recalls, some of the main streets and squares in the city were completely occupied by the strikers:

> Since May, the teachers of Oaxaca (pronounce wah-Ha-ka) have been encamped in the town square (Zócalo). This strike has been an annual event for the last twenty-five years and usually laste a coupe of weeks or until their demans for pay

---

[4] Originally from Ohio and born in 1958, Peter Kuper moved to New York in 1977 where he started a career as a political cartoonist. In 1980 he co—founded the left—wing oriented comics magazine *World War 3 Illustrated* with the artists Seth Tobocman and Christof Kohlohfer. Since 1997 he has been in charge of the comic strip *Spy vs Spy* published in *Mad* magazine. It is worthy of mention that Spy vs Spy original author was the Cuban cartoonist Antonio Prohías who created and work on this series from 1961-1987. Peter Kuper has also been the illustrator for a number of different magazine and book covers. He has been awarded in three occasions with gold and silver medals by the *Society of Illustrators* in 2004, 2009 and 2010.

> raises and funds for schools were met. For the fist time in the strike's history, the new governor, Ulises Rúiz Ortiz (Uro), decided not to agree to their demands,. Instead, on June 14th at 4:30 a.m., he sent in riot police in an attempt to forcibly expel them. This attack completely backfired. (Kuper 2008, 20).

So what the author decided to do was to explore in depth the complex political and social reality. The diary of Peter Kuper is not only focused on the political and social conflict observed there but also in the author's discoveries while travelling in the country reaching the most diverse places. He uses the most varied techniques from cartooning, to painting, photograph and collage. He thinks that this is not only a stylistic feature but a clear reflect of his way of seeing the world and representing it:

> It is my personality I just get bored very quickly and to do one style just seems like a repetition. To me is like clothing: if you wear the same clothes everyday you would start to smell so I just get to a point were I've done a certain type of work and even for that matter some of it is only biographical and some of it is my imagination. If I did one piece that had lots of words in it then the next piece might have no words at all and some of it is illustrations and some of it is sketchbooking and some of it is painting and I hope that by putting all that together I achieve this kind of "mezcla" [mix]. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

The following example is what I consider to be a consciously displaced cultural icon and an equally conscious juxtaposition of cultural boundaries. It is very evident that a cultural marker has been deliberately moved from its original position:

Figure 68. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 64).

There are two worlds juxtaposed in this page: the first one is a world composed by a frog representing an artisanal pot made of clay, the second world or vision is composed by the human figure, a white blond girl who represents the author's daughter and wears a t-shirt with the "I ♥ New York" logo. What would appear like a simple allusion on behalf of the author to where he and his family come from is far more complex.

The pop style logo created by designer Milton Glaser dates back to 1976 and became one of the most emblematic pieces of the 20th century urban graphic design. This logo is not only a graphic reference to the urban space of New York but is also showing the direction of Kuper's aesthetic point of view. Behind the logo is the cartoonist who, through urban art including graffiti, posters or stencils, establishes connexions between the streets of two cities as different as New York and Oaxaca. It is therefore possible to say that what this picture communicates is that of a New Yorker's worldview, along with his family, have been displaced to Oaxaca. The two worlds represented here are therefore two juxtaposed urban spaces: Oaxaca and New York. The final result is that the place portrayed in this page is not Oaxaca and is not New York, is somewhere in between.

By only introducing Glaser's logo, Kuper alludes to his New York imaginary intervening in his representation of Oaxaca, he asserts to have also achieved to permeate the influence of his time and work in Mexico when putting together his new book on New York City. This process will be described in detail in the following sections.

I also find relevant to mention that Kuper's art is not the only aspect of his book depicting a multiplicity of styles there are also simultaneous narrative lines. One of them are the many street dogs he found in Mexico. The author is constantly terrified by most of them, because while some of these dogs are calmly smelling around or sun bathing, some other appear abruptly scaring passers-by:

Figure 69. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 123).

The cartoonish representation that Kuper makes of himself in this walk through the city, with the icon of a heart coming out of his chest (panel 1) and the dotted line showing how he has moved away from the fence or the small lines on top of his head indicating how impressed he still is (panel 2), communicate the constant peril of being surprised by fierce dogs at anytime.

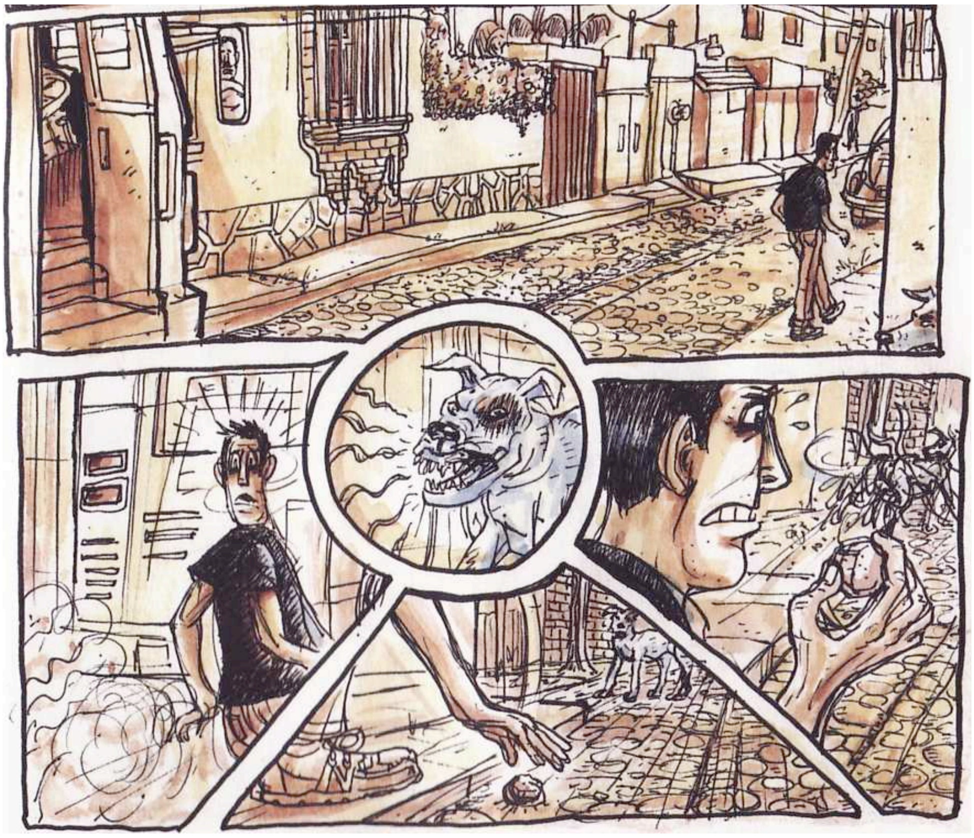


Figure 70. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 125).

This wordless sequence finds its narrative centre in the circular panel depicting the icon of an angry dog whose barking is "heard" thanks to his toothy snout projecting out sound waves. A man who walks calmly is about to be surprised by the dog barely showing in the right corner (panel 1). When the reckless dog makes his appearance (panel 2), the same individual is startled as it is denoted by his wide opened eyes as well as the vertical lines on top of his head and the spirals around his face and the trail of dust behind him indicating that he has turned back abruptly (panel 3). The next action is illustrated by the individual's hand shown about to grab a rock (panel 4). The final result being an interchange of roles with the man looking very much alike the dog (panel 2) with his face frowning and showing all of his teeth (panel 5) while the dog looks scared and surprised just like the man did before (panel 3). This is a perfect example of how in some occasions Peter Kuper chooses to narrate an experience in a sequential format situating himself as an outside observer and making use of an important convention, that is: "The peculiar convention of picture books that the same character can both appear in a picture as seen by an objective outsider and speak from the viewpoint of subjectivity—that instead of seeing the scene as from the speaker's eyes, we see the speaker in the picture" (Nodelman, 1998, 31). I also find it revealing that Kuper chooses to portraits himself wearing black. In his *New York Diary* he in fact makes a comment on how normal it is for New Yorkers to wear black and he contrasts this tendency with other more colourful cities in the United States. I think that finding street dogs so threatening is pointing towards his alien condition just as much as his black shirt.

Like I mentioned before, in Kuper's work dogs are not always scary or intimidating, they are an essential aspect of the city's landscape. And they do represent a homely feeling as well. As Francis Alÿs points out referring to his own work and reflections on Mexico City's dogs:

> The dog allows me to put a character behind this feeling of freedom that I have found here. I know that talking about freedom here is rather abstract, not to say politically incorrect, there is a series of elements that go against any notion of freedom in a political, economic, or racial context. But at the same time I have found here a sense of illusion of freedom that I have not encountered elsewhere. (Alÿs 2006,106).

I argue that the "feeling of freedom" found by Kuper in Oaxaca is also partially represented or at least reflected in these unleashed dogs and, as it has been shown in the sequence quoted above, there is a point in the narrative when the character learns how to cope with even the most scary ones.

Another thematic and narrative line of the book is how this is a journey filled with the multiplicity of colours and textures that captivated the author's pencil. In Kuper's work a tiny insect deserves the same attention than a hot salsa bottle or a vandalized car and he uses varied techniques from collage, to sequential panels and photographs juxtaposing the intellectual pre-Hispanic world and figures of popular culture like wrestlers as well as multiple references to religious icons visible on almost every corner of the city's distinctive colonial architecture. Kuper also portrays the natural beauty of the places he visits such as the monarch butterfly sanctuary, the jungle or a turtle shelter in the Pacific Coast as well as the urban space of Mexico City or the graffiti and street art in Oaxaca. The following is an example of his recount of the site of Monte Alban:

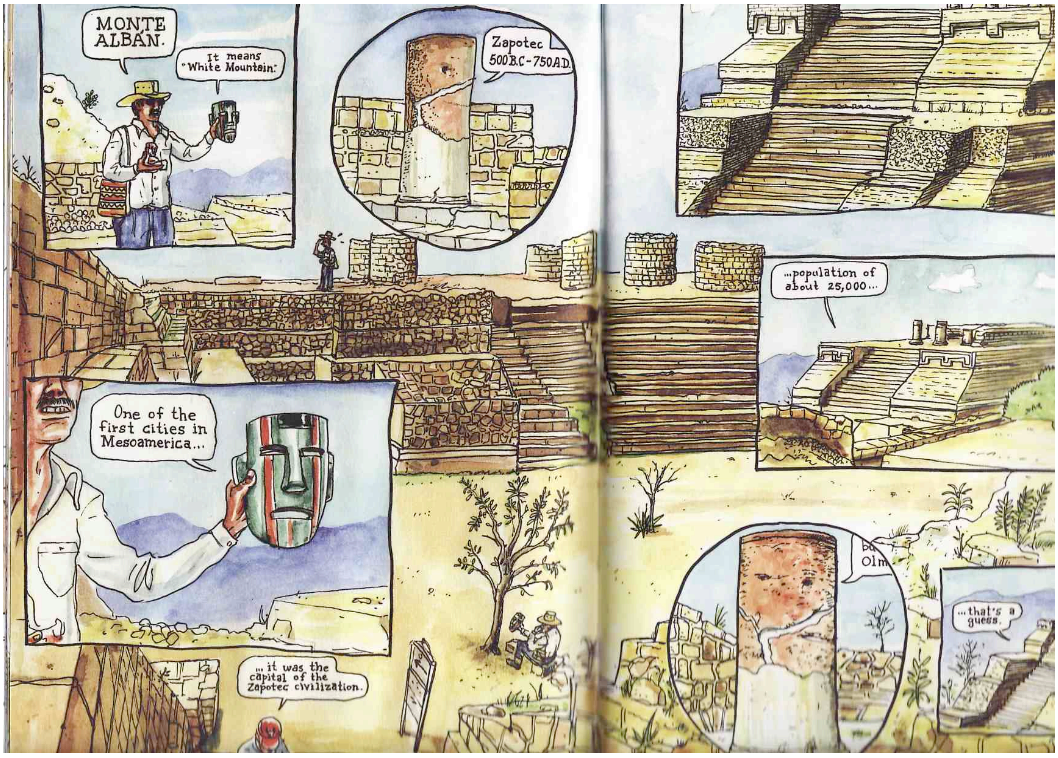


Figure 71. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 48).

In this double page spread a panoramic view of Monte Alban is set as the background, but this narrative is not static or linear. There is a simultaneity of actions occurring at the same time: the character sitting next to the tree in the centre of the page is also standing right next to the columns of top of the truncated pyramids (9). The series of panels distributed on both pages can be distinguished thanks to the use of edges, producing a zoom in effect. Both the character depicted wearing a red hat with what looks like a bull and might be alluding to a United States sports team and the man wearing a traditional palm hat (panel 1) speak using speech balloons. Although the gutter is not making obvious separations and intermittences, Kuper makes use of this page's horizontality in order to "sort out" the order of this sequence.

In spite of the fact that Kuper had embarked in this adventure as a sabbatical, he asserts that his "political cartoonist DNA" (Kuper 2001) forced him to devote full time to narrate a conflict happening right in front of his eyes and that the local press didn't achieve to report in all its magnitude. The experience also changed his perspective as both a graphic artist and a critic in many ways, I ask Kuper what has been the legacy of this experience in Mexico:

> When I got back from Mexico I had spent so much time drawing in my sketchbook then that I continued to do that. Only now I was drawing in New York with the influences of Oaxaca and that created a different view of New York for me and I was talking to my editors about the possibility of the next book continuing the "diario idea en Nueva York" [journal idea in New York]. So I looked in all the different work I created over that time but I also started creating new work. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

On the other hand, Kuper never renounced to his role as political cartoonist while drawing on his sketchbook during what was supposed to be a sabbatical leave. As it has been discussed in the section called Iconic Mexicanity it takes only a few panels for Kuper to summarize the complexity of cultural and political boundaries converging in Oaxaca. From religious references and devotion to the people's opposition to government, it can all be found in just one wall:

Figure 72. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 67).

Walking by the cemetery (panel 1) Kuper the character finds a fundamental principle of Christianity, "Hay que morir para vivir" [one must die in order to live], written on top of a cross (panel 2) and a stencil with the message “No más armas” [no more guns] (panel 3); then, in the wall of what looks like a very poor house, he finds the same persistent message “Oaxaca resiste” [Oaxaca hang on] with a street dog sleeping in the sidewalk and an old Volkswagen Beetle, also distinctive of the streets in Mexico, to the right. And a glimpse to quotidian life as illustrated by a child walking holding the hand of a woman, most likely his mother.

It is also possible for the author to find a multiplicity of topics, texture, motives and moments all of them going through the filter of a very sensorial experience that makes allusion to all senses:

> Gradually, my desire to escape the problems of life gave way to shelter my experiences. After answering the call to illustrate the dark moments of Oaxaca, I was inclined (no doubt the other part of my DNA) to capture its luminosity. I hope this collection illuminates both, the dodged storms in Oaxaca and the rich details of everyday life that made our two years in Mexico a gift (Kuper 2008, 13).

The following pages illustrate Kuper’s observation of his personal experience “drawing” Oaxaca:

Figure 73. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 114).

This double page spread is a perfect illustration of the constant interconnections between icons alluding to, both, past and present, between prevailing roots and the ever-changing nature of life as well as urban and natural landscapes. Cultural boundaries are very clearly depicted here: from pre-Hispanic icons, such as the men dressed up as ancient dancers or the Mixtec-Zapotec figure of a sitting deity, to colonial elements, such as the church on top of the waitress' head, the window of a house with iron fittings and the textile artisan. There is also a palpable presence of geographic boundaries: from multiple references to nature, like the icons of the red mountains or the prickly pear plant native of warm weather environments or the waitress' arm stylized as an "oyamel" tree native from cold forests where butterflies nest, to urban icons such as the street vendors, the "quesadillas" in a hot pan, the girl eating ice-cream, a person sitting on top of a fence and the ever present street dog sitting in the sidewalk. A metaphoric way to illustrate evolution would be the allusion to a caterpillar illustration that turns into a Monarch butterfly. The small texts that accompany some of the images are similar to those of a 19th century explorer's notebook who keeps track of the many small discoveries that construe the broader picture. In addition, the journal entries are interspersed with sequences in which the author makes little or no use of words. Like the following:

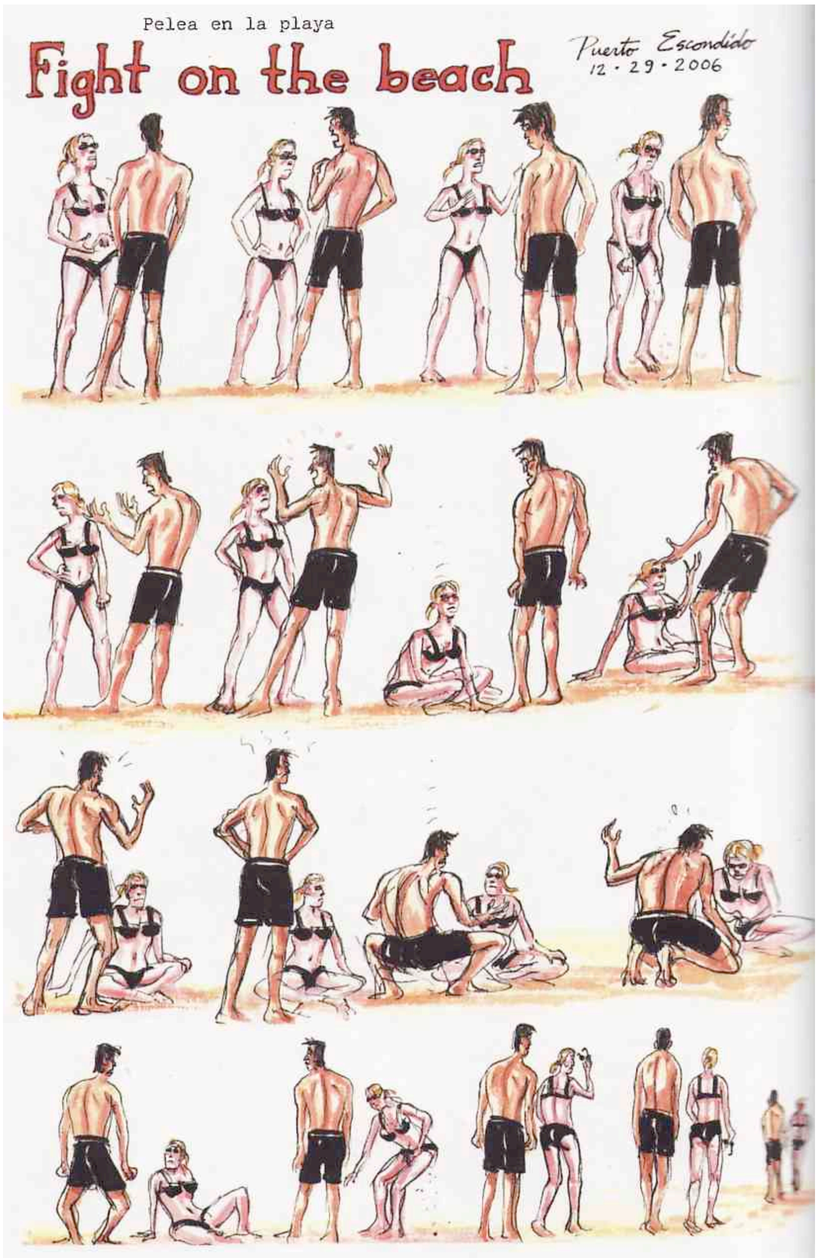


Figure 74. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 93).

In this case, the narrative flow is set by the characters' body language. Both figures extend their arms to express anger, look away to express indifference or walk away with their shoulders hunched in order to communicate that this discussion has not ended amicably. Kuper is narrating an anecdote of something observed while spending time in a beach in Puerto Escondido without using any words.

In addition, I would add that the aesthetic resource of synaesthesia is an important link between the author's interpretations of the urban space. As I have mentioned before, in the art of comics, just like in other visual art forms such as painting, the spectator assumes a convention to perceive what is only being suggested in an iconic form. According to Nodelman: “fiction is a permissive lie that the reader enjoys to believe” (1990, 25). This is an example of a way in which Kuper’s readers are enabled to experience the smells of the city:

Figure 75. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 59).

No travel log would be complete without a description of the smells, sounds and flavours of the site being visited. Kuper achieves not only to illustrate panoramic views of archaeological sites or everyday urban scenes but he is also able to illustrate quotidian, commercial, industrial and not necessarily flattering aromas. Like Abel, Kuper is captivated by jacarandas but in this case it is not the actual tree but a product that deserves his attention, this icon does not allude to natural beauty but to the result of an item positioned within the Mexican market following the guidelines of product localization.

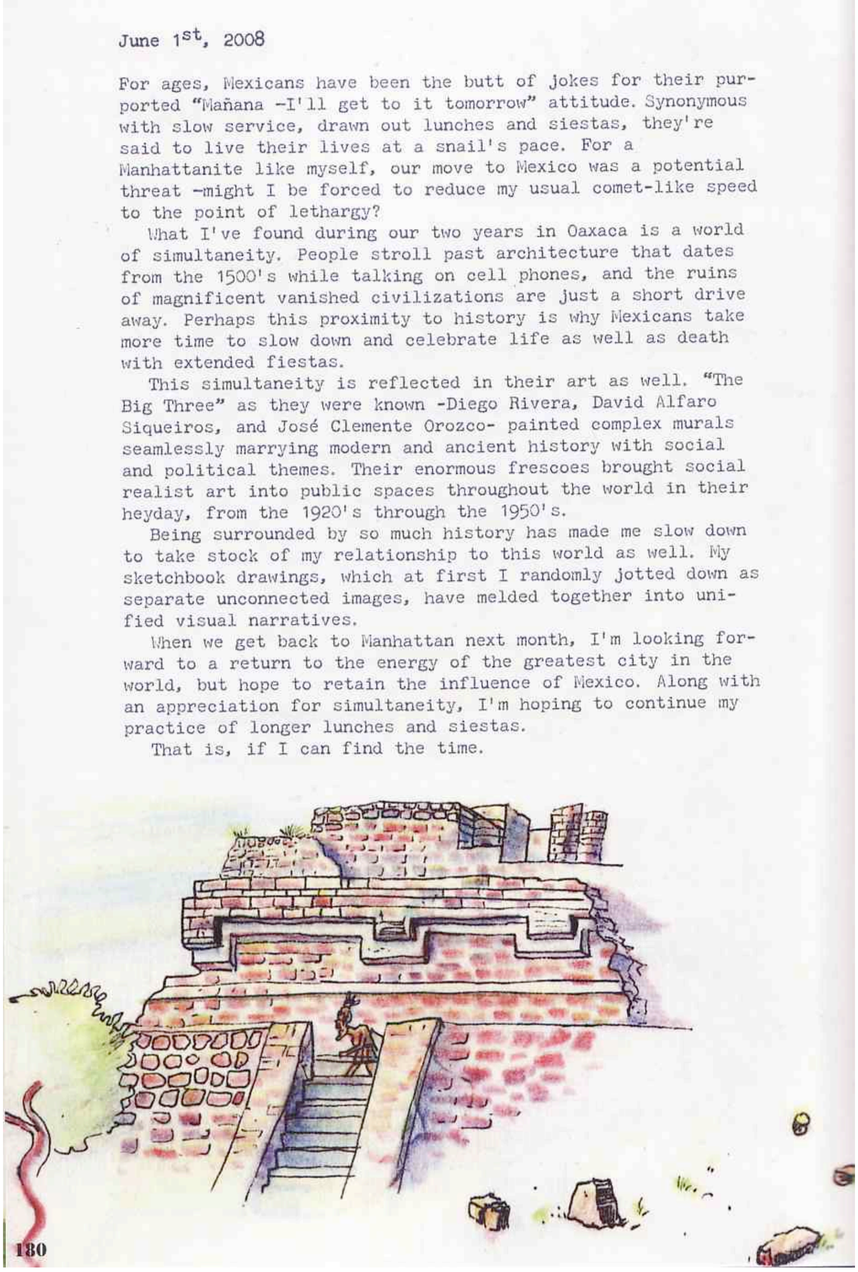
Iconic displacement is also achieved thanks to the fact of joining two different sensory domains: sight and smell. According to that proposed by Parker, this page could therefore be regarded as one of the many dynamics of interacting boundaries. In this case, synaesthesia is one of the most used resources of authors interested in the visual representation of Mexico's smells, flavours, sounds and textures. In Kuper's opinion the importance of representing the four other senses in an exclusively visual medium would be:

> I did something about the smells of New York and the smells of Oaxaca. A dead animal or food on the street are very much part of the experience so I'd like to think that the sounds and the smells are part of what ends up in the drawings. What you see in *Diario de Nueva York [Drawn to New York]* and *Diario de Oaxaca* is that. When I was drawing on the street and there was the impact of it being a hot day and maybe me not being comfortable at so many walks in front of my drawing, it was these changes and other influences that made the drawings more complicated than what they would ever be if I sat down and look at a photograph and tried to copy it. It would never have had any of that in it. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

Thus, the issue of synaesthesia addressed in this example draws on two resorts that will be reviewed in the next two section. The first one is simultaneity, the second is interconnection.

2.5.1.Simultaneity: Icons Past and Present

By the end of his book, Peter Kuper reaches significant conclusions about his experience in Mexico and what the long experience of this different culture has meant to him:



June 1st, 2008

For ages, Mexicans have been the butt of jokes for their purported "Mañana –I'll get to it tomorrow" attitude. Synonymous with slow service, drawn out lunches and siestas, they're said to live their lives at a snail's pace. For a Manhattanite like myself, our move to Mexico was a potential threat –might I be forced to reduce my usual comet-like speed to the point of lethargy?

What I've found during our two years in Oaxaca is a world of simultaneity. People stroll past architecture that dates from the 1500's while talking on cell phones, and the ruins of magnificent vanished civilizations are just a short drive away. Perhaps this proximity to history is why Mexicans take more time to slow down and celebrate life as well as death with extended fiestas.

This simultaneity is reflected in their art as well. "The Big Three" as they were known -Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco- painted complex murals seamlessly marrying modern and ancient history with social and political themes. Their enormous frescoes brought social realist art into public spaces throughout the world in their heyday, from the 1920's through the 1950's.

Being surrounded by so much history has made me slow down to take stock of my relationship to this world as well. My sketchbook drawings, which at first I randomly jotted down as separate unconnected images, have melded together into unified visual narratives.

When we get back to Manhattan next month, I'm looking forward to a return to the energy of the greatest city in the world, but hope to retain the influence of Mexico. Along with an appreciation for simultaneity, I'm hoping to continue my practice of longer lunches and siestas.

That is, if I can find the time.

180

Figure 76. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 180).

A Mexican who grew up in a country filled with pyramids, archaeological sites and other ancient ruins, could affirm that it is a rather romantic idea to assert that the contact with this pre-Columbian past is what makes over one hundred million Mexicans devote much of their time to party. If it is taken into account that Mexico is a country of 110 million people with countless realities, habitats and ways of life, it does sound hyperbolic to assume that all of them are equally exposed to the pre-Hispanic past as Kuper was during his sabbatical years in the colonial city of Oaxaca, located a few kilometres away from important archaeological sites such as Mitla and Monte Alban. This aspect of his book shows clearly what one of his editors, Francisco de la Mora asserts when he describes his work: “Kuper is a “gringo” [American] who has a “gringocentric” vision of the world, but he also thinks that he is a bit of the opposite.” (De la Mora 2011, n.p.).

In addition, the generalized sense of festivity attached to Mexican culture is very much a product of syncretism made possible thanks to the Spanish and the Indigenous inherited blend and, although this is a remarkable cultural aspect, it is not something that Mexican people necessarily experience equally or in a daily basis. And I do not only refer to the pace of millions of citizens living in huge metropolitan areas such as Mexico City, Monterrey or Guadalajara, to name a few examples, but also to the millions and millions of people working non-stop in the countryside that would also find it difficult to relate to this relaxed notion of life in Mexico. What I argue is that, by being able to describe elements of the past still present in contemporary Mexico, in this page Kuper has succeeded in capturing the poetic core of this book, that is, as he mentions, simultaneity. Kuper is able to constantly juxtapose different boundaries such as: English and Spanish on each journal, picture and collage, the concepts of tradition, roots, change, history, politics and civilization.

This is why I argue that *Diario de Oaxaca* is not only a journalistic work but also representative of an intimate universe, the multi-coloured and detail-oriented illustrations and collages juxtapose moments captured by a patient observer. The tempo of the book shows that the author had time to contemplate, to think, to re-think and to translate his psychic flow into everyday objects. The environment has been integrated. This is a book that appeals to the senses and memory mixing both the methodology of the journalist and the artist's sensibility. An artist who is integrated as much as possible to its environment and he is aware of the fact that the excessive realism or, on the contrary, a totally caricaturesque represantion in his comic book would re-affirm the otherness.

In the works of authors studied there is a direct observation of such realism since the lines have the ability to represent the "visible and invisible" (McCloud 1994, 128):

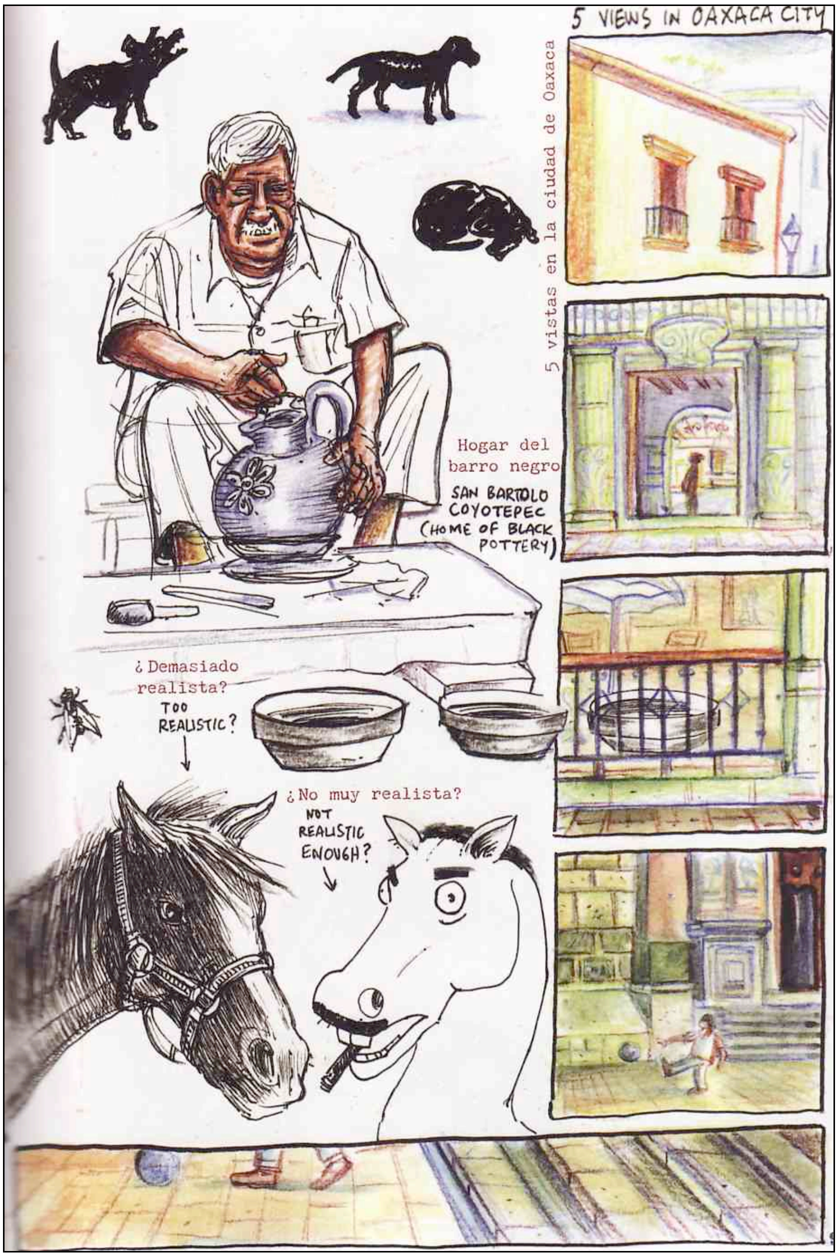


Figure 77. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 79).

Kuper shows the images, feelings, emotions, actions and atmospheres demonstrating a conscious reflexion on his creating process. From fragmented panels focusing on tiny details as the boy's feet (panel 6) to travel postcards explaining the relevance of a town called San Bartolo Coyotepec (panel 1) and the transition from where are the clay pots made and how are they used (panel 4) including details of other views of windows (panel 2) and doors (panel 3).

In this section I have demonstrated that Kuper's duty as political cartoonist influenced his Oaxaca diary. In the following section I will show more in depth the interchange between his worldview as cartoonist, his acquired aesthetic influences in Oaxaca and how all of these are visible in other recent works such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Drawn to New York.*

2.5.2. Back to New York with Stop Over in Wonderland

Peter Kuper considers that the experience of creating *Diario de Oaxaca* had a notorious impact in his subsequent books like illustrating a new version of *Alice in Wonderland* (2009) and his most recent sketchbook *Drawn to New York* (2011). In the three cases, Kuper's creative process was influenced by his awareness on the interconnections that his works have and the transformations that they necessarily go through thanks to their dialogic relationship with the real world, as he explains:

> The drawings I did in Oaxaca I was sending them to France and then somebody posted them on their website and then that was seen by somebody who ended up doing an article in *Reforma* about me being in Oaxaca and I just thought: "Oh is a big circular world!" with all of these connections… and I did something very simple but it then transformed that way and I am always interested to do that. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

During our interview, I asked Kuper about the relevance of *Alice in Wonderland* for a contemporary political cartoonist, his response was:

> Alice was a challenge but it was also a welcomed opportunity to apply what I was doing in Oaxaca in my sketchbook and then doing it in illustration and spend a period of time with material like that because is such a classic. Interestingly there's a subtext that's political, the original book had the works of the artist John Tenniel who drew the political figures of his time as the characters and so it was a perfect opportunity for me to then use current political figures. So the rabbit if you look closer it looks a little bit like Clinton, or the "gato" [cat] is Richard Nixon. Reagan makes an appearance and so does Dick Cheney and the mad hatter fits just too perfectly with George Bush so I was able to bring some of those aspects in. (Kuper 2011,n.p.).

I also asked him what difference it made for him to only illustrate a story in comparison to being the author of both, words and pictures: "It was really enjoyable to spend a long period of time with those characters because the writing is so beautiful." (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

The following pages are samples or Kuper's illustrations of this classic children's book:

Figure 78. Kuper, Peter (2010) "Alicia en el País de las Maravillas."(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

Figure 79. Kuper, Peter (2010) "Alicia en el País de las Maravillas."(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

Figure 80. Kuper, Peter (2010) "Alicia en el País de las Maravillas."(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

I argue that one of the greatest virtues of the fictional world created by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland* is precisely that he is able to introduce numerous cultural icons which are distinctively British while referring to inherently human, timeless and always contemporary matters that give the narrative its universal, transcendent quality. In the illustrations above, Kuper recovers those British cultural icons such as the tea party, Alice's polite manners and her utter disapproval with her table companions misconduct or the value of punctuality and, of course, a Cheshire cat. But, besides the physical resemblance of the characters with real political figures, he also juxtaposes icons that evoke some of the United States politics most controversial moments. For example, the tapes inside the tree hole make reference to the Watergate case that involved the polemical voice recordings of compromising conversations that ended up leading to President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. And the cigar in the rabbit's vest alludes to Clinton's sexual scandal with a young White House intern, Monica Lewinsky that was made public in 1998.

In addition, this is the type of narrative that is equally capable to connect with both adult and young readers. As Appleyard asserts in her book *Becoming a Reader*, in later childhood reading is a tool to discover one's role as son or daughter or sister, for example, but it is also a way to explore the private world of feelings, emotions and thoughts:

> Reading is a prime tool at one's disposal for gathering and organizing information about the wider world and learning how that world works (…) But at the same time reading is a way of exploring an inner world, especially as the child gets older. (Appleyard 1991, 59).

I argue that the adult reader of Kuper's *Alice in Wonderland* experiences a similar process: through political awareness the reader discusses, accepts or rejects the point of view proposed by the author and therefore affirms a posture within the social scope but also asks herself/himself the existential question that the character of Alice goes back to again and again in the narrative: "who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!" (Carroll 1992, 67).

In the case of *Drawn to New York*, as it has been stated in the previous section, once back in the United States, Kuper compiled some of his work inspired in the city of New York and created a book with the influence of the cultural icons encountered in Oaxaca. The following pages are an example of such case:

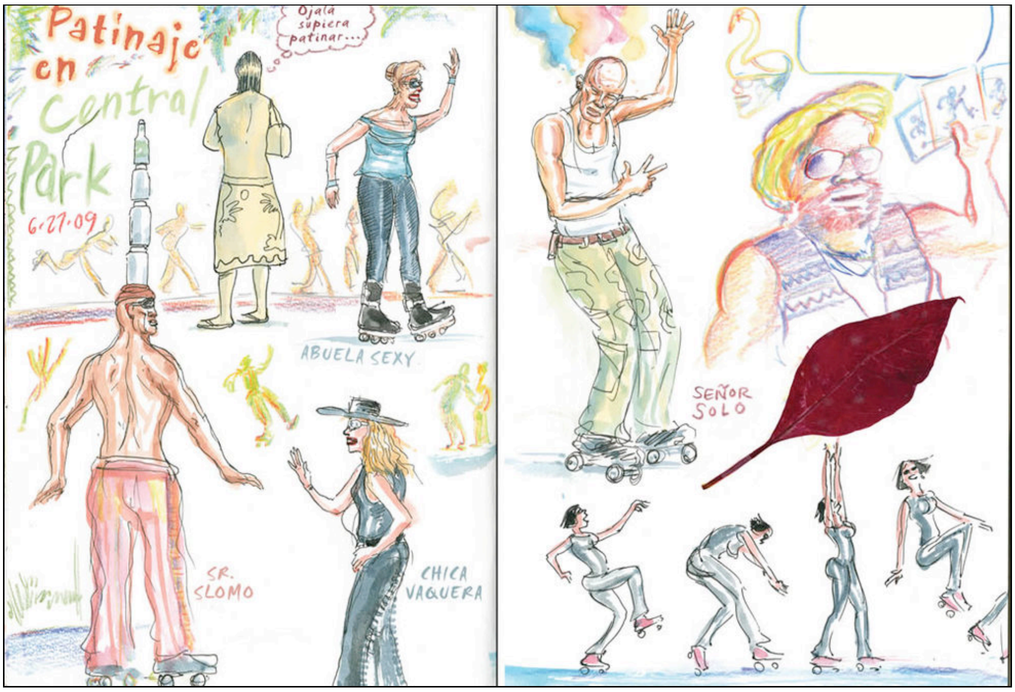


Figure 81. Kuper, Peter (2012) “Drawn to New York.” (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

This double page spread portrays people in Central Park and reminds of Kuper’s depictions of pedestrians walking around Oaxaca’s Zócalo [main square]. In both cases he achieves to capture the biorhythm of the citizens. If Oaxaca’s main square depicts lively people and sleepy dogs during the afternoon, in the case of this page, a most varied group of energetic people full appear to be skating or wishing to do so: from the sexy grandmother, to the cowgirl or the dancing woman in the left. All of them are drawn as very distinctive characters and each one in their own way seems to be putting up a show, making allusion to an almost archetypical conception of New Yorkers. It’s a warm weekend in the early summer, as the characters’ light clothing and the date inform, and an ideal occasion to enjoy nature, as the tree leaf communicates, in the heart of the city.

I asked Peter Kuper how are the stylistic transitions made visible in the art of *Drawn to New York* and he replied the following:

> New York is all about change and to capture it, to express that change one style would be kind of missing parts of it. So my earlier work was more in black and

> white and it captured a certain aspect of my experience but it definitely needed colour. Watercolours are good but then I also had the influence of graffiti. I started doing stencils and things that were more graphic and I brought that into it. I thought it would show a broader sense of New York which represents so many different cultures and so many different ideas all pushed together in this one tiny island. (Kuper 2011, n.p.).

This conscious use of multiple styles and techniques is almost a statement verifiable from front to back cover—literally:

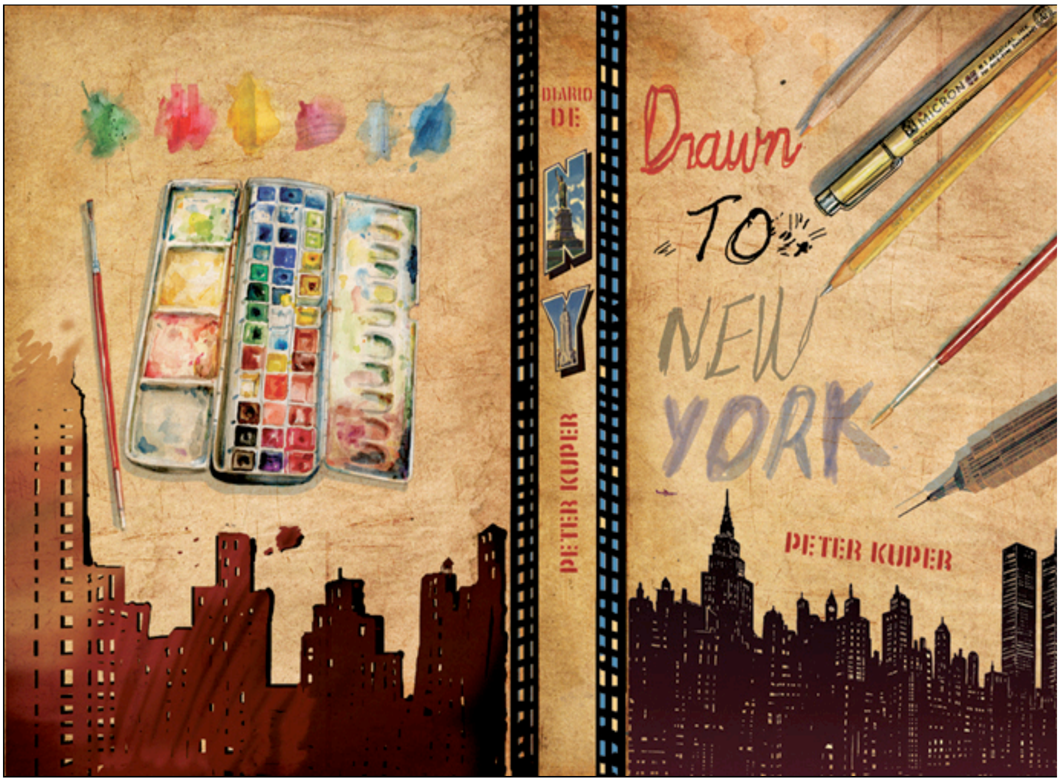


Figure 82. Kuper, Peter (2012) "Drawn to New York." (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

These are the front, the spine and the back cover of the *Drawn to New York* English edition in which Kuper represents the multiplicity of techniques used within the book. To begin with, in the front, a different utensil appears next to each one of the words in the title: there is the brush, the pencil, the pen and the colour that have been used in order to write them whereas a big propelling pencil –that resembles the Empire State Building- has been used in order to illustrate the city's skyline. Politics are introduced with very few elements such as the Twin Towers on the right hand side and a small plane flying towards one of them. This very subtle but blunt allusion to September

11th sets an important thematic line and permeable boundary of the book: politics. In the spine, the skyscrapers' allusion also resembles a cinematographic film, the name in Spanish has been kept and the letters N and Y show postcard style pictures of two cultural icons: the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State. The buildings in the back cover contrast with the realistic representation of the skyline in the front since these have been painted with watercolours and make the style look more impressionistic, rather than realistic.

In this case, the author is stating everything that can be found inside this book: New York as drawn, painted, coloured, stencilled by a political cartoonist who has lived there for many years and who has also produced a similar previous work in Spanish.

2.6. The "Superchild" in Ciudad Juarez

Edmond Baudoin's[5] and Jean Marc Troubet's[6] *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* is set in the North frontier and portrays an industrial city where most of the "maquiladoras" (manufacturers) are based. This city has got one of the lowest unemployment indexes in the country and has also got the highest murder rate in the whole world, particularly directed to women, and is infamously known because of the crime impunity prevailing since the early 1990's. As Rafael Luévano documents in his essay "The Theological Challenge of the Juárez-Chihuahua Femicides" based on information provided by scholars such as Diana Washington Valdez and Rosa Linda Fregoso; press reports by Associated Press and research carried out by international human rights organizations like Amnesty International:

---

[5] Edmond Baudoin was born in 1942 in Nice, he has worked as a designer, teacher, writer and illustrator. Since the late 1960's he started his career as comics author for a number of French magazines and in the 1980's he began to actively publish books of different categories like comics, art, children's literature and illustrations for special editions of works by acclaimed authors such as Jean Genet or Lautréamont. Baudoin has been a very active creator of French publishing houses such as Futuropolis –which compiled some of his most celebrated works in albums like *Primer Voyage* (1996)– and L'Association, which was founded in 1990 by a group of cartoonists including David B. and Jean Christophe Menu who nowadays regard him as: "nothing less than a legend, one of the major comics artists working today" (Lambiek 2012).

[6] Jean Marc Troubet "Troub's" was born in 1969 in Pessac, he graduated from Fine Arts and became a travel—book author documenting his travels in places such as Madagascar, China and Australia. Troub's has published a number of comics like *Manao Sary* (2001) and *Troub's en Chine* (2006) by Éditions Alain Beaulet and thanks to his extensive experience as traveller and comics author he was invited by Edmond Baudoin to create *Viva la Vida*(…) in 2010.

> In Northern Mexico, increasing numbers of violent events have dramatically affected women's lives. Since 1993, more than 250 women have dramatically disappeared and at least 500 women have been killed in the border town of Juárez, Mexico, and surrounding state of Chihuahua. Domestic violence was the cause of approximately two-thirds of these murders. The rest can likely be attributed to targeted violence surrounding narcotics trafficking. Young women between the ages of ten and thirty are kidnapped, tortured, raped, and murdered. In many cases, their boides are mutilated; in most cases, their remains are dumped in the desert slums on Juárez's outskirts. On occasion, murderers leave victims' bodies in the city's central business distric, in what appears to be an arrogant display of perpetrators' immunity from the law. These crimes are commonly referred to as "The Maquiladora Murders," a reference to the women's factory worker status. I contend that they are part of a wider cycle of violence called "femicide".

In addition, as it has been previously mentioned, thousands of migrants going from Central America and from all over Mexico reach the border every year with the hope of being able to cross to the United States, a few drug cartels also dispute the power in this area. In summary, Juarez has it all: pollution, drug trafficking, sexism, illegal migration, corruption, the world's biggest problems concentrated in a city of more than one million inhabitants.

The comic book begins with the two authors depicted in the International Festival of Angoulême discussing the situation in Ciudad Juarez, "the most frequented city in the frontier in northern Mexico", that has turned into "Texas' brothel" (Baudoin, Troubs 2011, 12).

Figure 83. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 12).

The stories they have read about Juarez remind them of a "Western" or to their personal experiences crossing the border in Tangier. Baudoin applied for a grant to Culture France and invited Troub's to participate in this project. Their idea was simple: to find places where they can draw people's portraits and-ask each one of them the same question: "What is your dream?," in order to search for the meaning of life in "a city where people die" (Baudoin 2011, n.p.). They begin their tour in Mexico City. In order to differentiate their narrative voices they introduce the icons of a turtle and a goat:

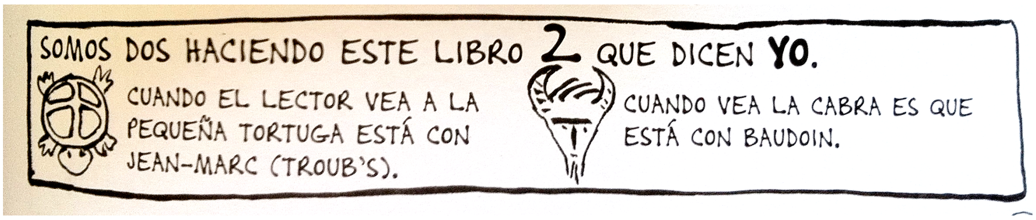


Figure 84. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 37).

The authors do not provide a further explanation of why has each one of them picked these animal icons, they also use a different typography to distinguish their voices. There is, however, a third typography mostly used by Baudoin. All to say that, as it will be shown further on, it is not always clear who is talking and what the narrative strategy is. I interviewed Baudoin with regard to what was it like for him to produce a comic book with another author. His response was:

> It was the first time I worked with another person. He had other books with other people but this experience was the first time and it was very good. I have known Jean Marc for many years, he is a traveller, a great traveller, and well, we are two travellers together. So there was a certain brotherhood between us even though we do not always have the same worldview. (Baudoin 2011, n.p.).

The road trip by these authors does not follow the original plan, Ciudad Juarez is 1, 805 kilometres away from Mexico City, and their idea was to advance 500 kilometres per day; it should have not taken them more than four days but it ends up being a longer trip because they, for example, followed a detour to Durango simply because they find this name “magical”. The first images of the trip show a mix of people portraits and urban imaginary. The text is very often descriptive of the picture and emphasizes the book’s constant sense of discovery.

Before getting on their way to Mexico City Baudoin and Troub’s visited a French citizen in prison, Florence Cassez, and also the Alternative Book Fair in Central Alameda, in the city centre. The next day they start the road trip to Ciudad Juarez stopping before in Querétaro and León. In the second day of their journey the authors intend to do a detour to the city of Durango but they are advised to go straight to Coahuila; they did manage to stop within the State of Durango, in the town of Cuencamé, before visiting the city of Torreón and making a few more stops in their way to Chihuahua finally arriving in Ciudad

Juarez after four days of travelling. They spend about six weeks in Juarez interviewing people of all ages and backgrounds, from sellers in the streets to writers and young people in their classroom, most of them are keen to share the most varied “dreams” they have for the future: from studying and getting a job, to find happiness or buying a ranch or contributing to build a better world for their children.

In the end of the book, Baudoin makes what I find to be the most accurate, although somewhat unconscious, self-critical remark of his work. I would pinpoint this comment as the best way to describe their initiative:

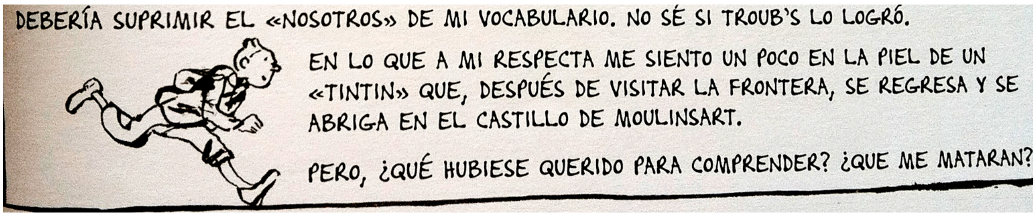


Figure 85. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 133).

It is crucial to analyze in depth this glimpse of the icon of Tintin. By deconstructing the, at first glance, casual allusion to this character created by the Belgian artist Hergé in 1929 it is possible to discover the discursive line of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez.* It is not fortuitous that the author identifies himself with a young, imaginative and heroic reporter whose philosophy —inspired in Boy Scouts idealism— is in fact his infallible weapon to face evil all around the world. Although it is true that the authors of this book are not taking up Hergé’s polemic racist, stereotypical and colonialist iconicity as illustrated in his controversial book *Tintin in the Congo* (1931), now banned from children’s literature shelves in bookstores and libraries in the UK, one can argue that there is a Tintinesque sense of childish enchantment used by these authors in order to neutralize the violence found in Juarez. I think that Tintin’s candid and puerile approach to an unknown and dangerous world is echoed in their book: they feel as if they were immersed in a Western film, or in an exotic land that resembles an idealised Morocco. This is, in fact, a verifiable tendency in certain works of French literature. In *Hergé and the Myth of the Superchild* (2007), Jean-Marie Apostolidès asserts that Hergé is following a tradition, invented in France, known as the “superchild, which stands in contradistinction to the Nietzschean superman” (2007, 45). According to this critic, it was well cultivated by young writers such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont or Cravan, as well as novels and films of the interwar period which, according to Apostolidès, demonstrated that: “The considerable arrogance of this generation derived not only from its rejection to patriarchal values, but also from its symbolic victory over parents—two key motifs of the superchild myth.” (2007, 45).

I think that a subconscious arrogance of the type argued by Apostolidès is verifiable in these authors who define themselves as “dream-catchers” in a city “where people die”; their rejection to patriarchal values is visible in their de-legitimization of numerous institutions and authorities that they encounter in the country. Baudoin openly confesses his “innocence”: “Surely I am a big innocent because I believe that those women who die bring down, with their fall, pieces of the border fence of the racism imposed on them by men.” (Baudoin and Troub’s 2011, 33), which can be interestingly contrasted to his own self-identification with the icon of Tintin and the role that this character’s innocence plays in the narrative:

> In Hergé’s work, in order for the boy to attain the full status of a superchild, he (or his double) must defeat an archaic paternalistic power, such as Rastapopoulos in *Les cigars du pharaon*. The defeat of this archaic figure not only allows the hero to free himself from childhood fears, but it also creates the very dynamic of the entire adventure. Moreover, the defeat of the malevolent character does not entail his death, but only his metamorphosis. Tintin never comes into direct contact with the forces of Evil, but remains fundamentally *innocent*. (2007, 48).

I therefore consider that these authors’ “superchildish” attitude is the most significant case of iconic displacement in their book. It is also what turns the entire comic into a very intricate interpretation of what they are witnessing. And, as it will be demonstrated, they are constantly juxtaposing superchild icons and those of Mexicanity. They do not fight “Evil”, they transform it or, to put it in iconic terms, they replace it and, in order to do so, they come up with turtles, goats, butterflies, dream-catchers, Frida Kahlo and Tintin.

The following page is an example of the general dynamic of the book:

Figure 86. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 46).

I would argue that the dreams of the Mexican citizens that the authors collect in their journey to Juarez are not very different from what people would have replied in other countries all around the world: "I would like to travel a lot" (panel 2) or "I would like to be happy and make other people happy" (panel 3) could might as well be catalogued as universal human dreams or desires. The iconic goat in the bottom of the page describes Baudoin's own dream: "I have wanted for so long to get here" (2011, 46) making reference to his increasing proximity to Ciudad Juarez.

As it is discussed in the sub-section called "Appointing Aversion" when talking about the issues of representing unpleasant realities, this comic book was inspired by Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* (2004). The French authors embarked on a mission of "collecting" the people's dreams in Ciudad Juarez. In spite of claiming political impartiality, this comic is notoriously tendentious and does not hide the author's points of view. In other words, this is not a work of journalism but a very personal and subjective approach of two authors who spent a few weeks looking at a long-time rooted conflict involving all sorts of socio-political tensions.

Due to the intervening icon of the superchildish figure who dreams and invites other people to dream too, this comic book is by no means as emotionally distant, sombre and restrained as Bolaño's novel which in my opinion has got as its major virtue the ability to portray a brutal reality resisting the temptation to lecture the reader and employing an equally complex and rich narrative strategy. On the other hand, from its very title alluding to a painting by Frida Kahlo, this comic book points from the start in the direction of where it is going. The authors applied for a cultural grant bestowed by the French government in order to travel to Mexico to find hopeful people in a violent city, to exalt the well-known archetypes of Mexicanity and to produce a comic book that would thick all the boxes of the current cultural agenda, a goal that they have certainly achieved.

The following page describes one of their first stops during their road trip to Ciudad Juarez:

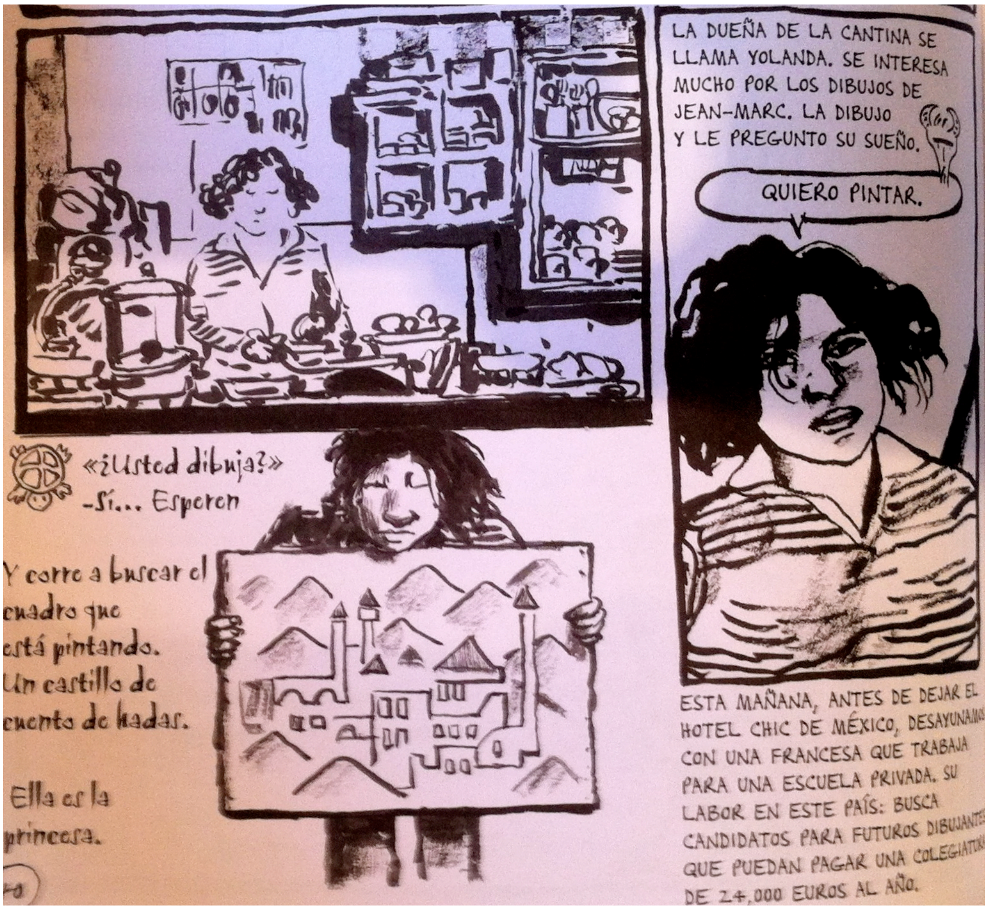


Figure 87. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 40).

The character depicted above is the owner of the restaurant and she is also a painter. It is described that her dream is to be able to paint and her hopes of becoming an artist are contrasted with the fairy-tale castle represented in her own painting (panel 3). According to Troub's, this young woman is "the princess" of this castle. Baudoin also narrates that they had breakfast with a French teacher who works at a private school where they search for talent to go to study abroad. What the authors are stating in this page is that the "princess" of an imaginary castle needs to find a way to be taken out of the motorway restaurant in order to afford higher education.

All throughout their journey, the authors report what they see and what they read in the newspapers, they also reproduce photographs and, in some of the panels, use collage techniques; their iconic resort of the goat and the turtle is not as clear as they intend it to be so is not always obvious who is talking or, if that is the case, they do not achieve to build a clear distinction between their joint voice and their individual voice. During their stay in Juarez they also join the Day of the Dead celebration; they also make the long queue to cross the border and visit El Paso, Texas. They reflect on the issues that thousands of illegal migrants face every single day risking their lives and paying big amounts of money to extortionists that offer to lead them on their journey across the desert. They compare this situation to that of Moroccan migrants trying to reach the European coast.

Joe Sacco, who has published remarkable works of journalism in war zones and whose comic books include the famous works *Palestine* (1993-1995) and *Notes from Gaza* (2010), has a tendency to represent himself with a somewhat distorted image.

Figure 88. Sacco, Joe (2001) *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 45).

For Sacco, who in real life is noticeably better looking than his self-portrait, this self-depiction is a way to indicate that the events narrated are his perception. The result is that it presents an introspective, but not sentimental, narrative that achieves a powerful bond of closeness with the reader. In this narrative strategy, it is the messenger who exalts the importance of the message and not of himself. This is the work of a journalist, not a superchildish dreamer-traveller. The angry face of the soldier (panel 1) and Sacco's self-portrait (panel 3-5) exalt the cartoonish representation of the human face, such as his disproportionately large mouth and nose. While there is something left in between, the buildings and the street depicted in detail and the thoroughly represented wrinkled faces of old women, produce a realistic effect (panel 2). Sacco is not included graphically in the image, however, the text box that explains the context of this situation makes it clear to the reader that the scene is seen through his individual yet strictly informative perspective.

In a conference held at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, during the Comica Festival in 2009, Sacco assured that one of the reasons why he doesn't portray a more realistic image of himself is in order to emphasize the filter of subjectivity that his own narration of events goes through. And when he was asked if he ever got depressed of covering wars and misery, he simply replied that he does get tired of drawing so many dead bodies. This is, in my opinion, a closer point of view to that of Bolaño's: an author who does not attach his own emotional references in order to sublimate a violent reality and who is therefore able to allow people to narrate their own stories without re-directing them.

It is precisely the lack of balance to challenge all of the involved parts that turns *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* into a very problematic book. This is not only due to the fact that the authors are superchildish but also because they do not manage to build what García Canclini refers to as "chaotic polyphony" as it has been explained on the section titled "Urban Displacement." So that all the voices recuperated in this book have gone through the superchildish filter. The following page is an example of this issue:

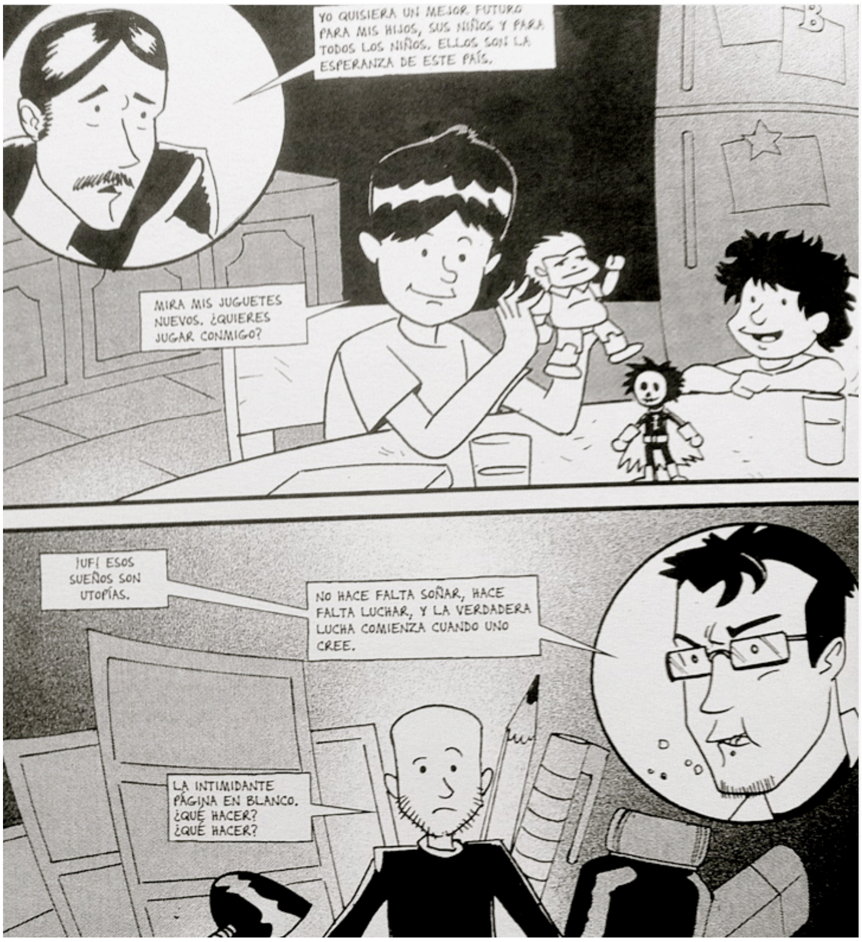


Figure 89. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 118).

The comic book dedicates a few pages to a local collective of artists called "Studio 656" who share with the authors their own dreams in a comic strip format. When given the opportunity, Juarez' comics authors do not engage with a socio-political situation but with the superchildish world encapsuled by Baudoin and Troub's. They come up with very generalized fantasies, purposes and good wishes. From children being able to play and share their new toys (panel 1) to overcome a creative block or to hold firmer convictions (panel 2). As Ernesto Priego asserts it is quite evident that the authors of Studio 656 including Francisco Arce, Marcos Porras and Oliver Lee Arce, do not reflect in their comics the topic of border violence and they seem to be more in tune with the United States comics industry focused on superheroes (Priego 2011, n.p.). This is not an isolated case of Mexican comics creators disengaged from socio-political issues such as migration, impunity and insecurity, such situation brings an important insight to what the real problem is, according to Priego:

> There is a symbolic violence in the fact that the citizens of one country are not able to narrate their own stories directly.

> The stories belong to the world and humanity, yes, but those living affected by a situation should have the right to speak about it. The debate is complex, and in the field of literature is not new. In the medium of comics, however, much remains to be discussed. (Priego 2011, n.p.).

I therefore do not think that this book is becoming a gateway for local authors to narrate the conflict in their own words, quite the opposite, it is contributing to accentuate ambiguity. Such ambiguity that I find so problematic is openly acknowledged by one of his authors, Baudoin, who recognizes this aspect as one of its most distinctive qualities. During the interview he conceded to me, I asked him whether he thought that this book could be defined as a comic or if it was more accurately to refer to it as a travel journal. He asserted that, for him, creating this comic book was rather like:

> Setting up a projector on a landscape, a population, over a city. It's like a picture revealed. I do not know if it's journalism, I do not know what the exact word would be. In the past we used to subscribe work into a determinate category or definition, we could say ‘there's a journalist,’ ‘there's an artist or a writer,’ but today everything is mixed a little. The journalist is both a writer and a designer at the same time, everything is permeated. (Baudoin 2011, n.p.).

Hence, the reason why I find this problematic is because it seems to imply that using a “projector” or “revealing a picture” might be understood as presenting a neutral portrait. And in my opinion, not only the careful selection of images collected on the road is in itself a very personal statement on behalf of the authors, but also how both of them can’t resist the temptation to use words that direct the reading of each one of this apparently realistic pictures. As Nericcio asserts “There’s perception and then there’s reality” (Nericcio 2011). And Ciudad Juarez has been perceived by numerous plastic artists, writers, illustrators, political cartoonists and comics authors. In the following section I would like to point out a few issues of how the authors’ perception of themselves is a constant object of representation within *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*.

2.6.1. Picture-in-picture

In my opinion, *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* is highly influenced by the same creative process visible in some of the works by Jean Marc Troubet. I would argue that the travel books of Troub’s are not so much about the places he visits as they are about him visiting such places. The narrative of his comic books is mostly based on his personal experiences, thoughts and observations while travelling in a foreign country like Madagascar, or a French region like Bordeaux. He is not particularly interested in producing fiction or documentaries based on his trips as he is rather focused on creating a *carnet du voyage* [travel book] where his figure as traveller, observer and illustrator is represented constantly. This is verifiable from the very title of comic books like *Troub's en Chine* [Troubs in China] where it is emphasized that he is the central axis of the narrative. The following page is taken from it:

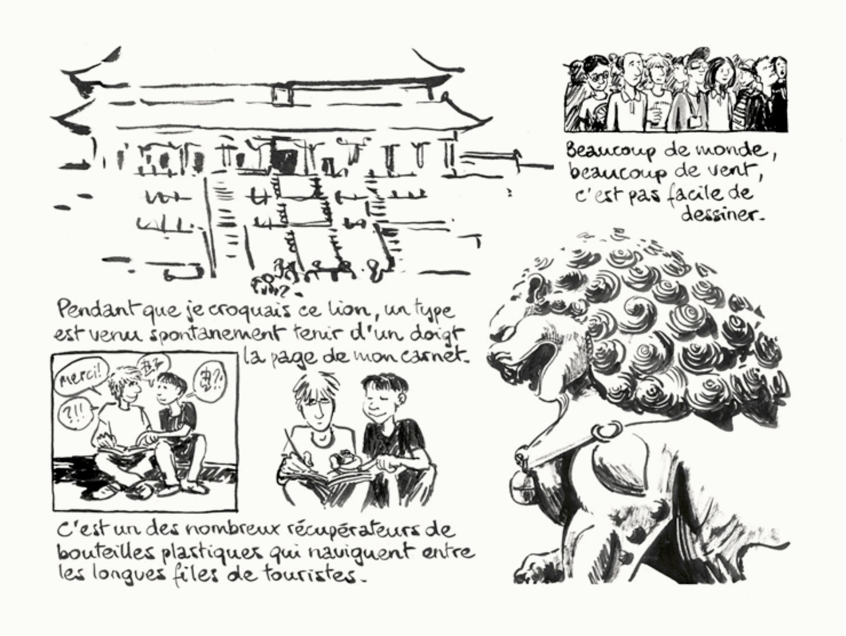


Figure 90. Troub's (2006) *Troub's en Chine* (Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet,15).

Troub's is approached by a local man who assists him by holding with one finger the page of his sketchbook where he is drawing the lion in the right. He explains that this man is one of several plastic bottle collectors that can be found in the endless tourist queues of this windy site. In this page what is being represented is the author while drawing this same page, Troub's does have a recurrent interest in portraying his creative process, in representing the represented.

The following page, taken from another of his comics, *Walkatju* (2003) where he features his own adventures while taking a road trip on his own along the Australian desert. The author narrates a stop over where he has an encounter with a perentie, Australia's largest lizard:

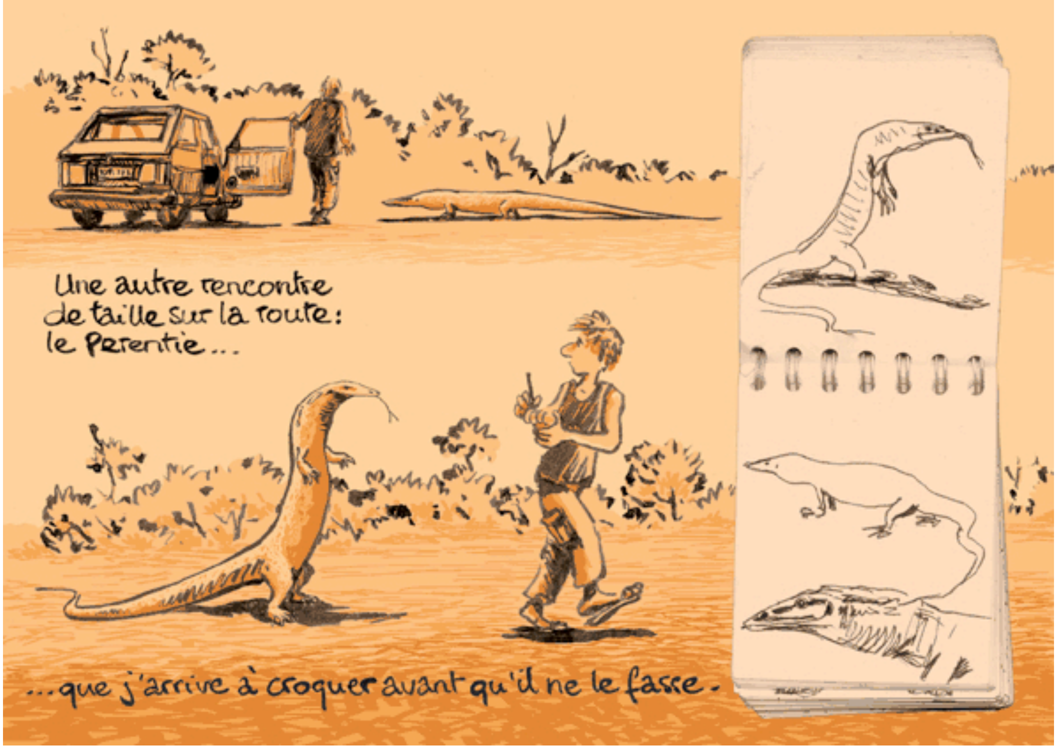


Figure 91. Troub's (2003) *Walkatju* (Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet, 13).

In this page, Troub's includes again his sketchbook as a central iconic object. In this case the representation on the left is realistic, almost like a photograph and the flipping of the pages is shown suggesting previous drawings, that is to say, a collection of images that he has got so far and that will eventually turn into the book that the reader holds in his hands.

Both examples are cases where the author represents how he imagines he would have looked like while drawing the lizard or the lion or when attempting to communicate with the Chinese man. I argue that the main objects of representation in these two examples are himself and his creative process and not the lion or the perentie. He is portraying himself within these scenarios and not the scenarios as such. Similar moments are also found in *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* where the authors describe how they work together while sharing an apartment in Ciudad Juarez:

Figure 92. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 99).

The tailless speech balloons represent the ongoing conversation of the authors discussing where they should insert a map or a piece of text. It is not important to mention exactly what bit of their journey are they working on, it could be any segment of the book that is being read. What is most relevant for the authors' here is to include their creative process as part of their comic book which I find it to be a displaced iconic representation from the one usually employed by Troub's in his travels around the world.

Equally important is the issue of replacing cultural icons by other icons that seem to fulfil the same communicative goal. This aspect will be explained in the following section.

2.6.2. Iconic Replacement

In more than one page of *Viva la Vida. Los Sueños en Ciudad Juárez* there can be spotted pictures in which a specific icon has been replaced by another one. This can be identified by, for example, comparing a photograph of a children's library in Ciudad Juarez and the following illustration made by the artists during their visit to that city, which means to represent it.

Figure 93. Escritores por Ciudad Juárez (2011) "Escritores por Ciudad Juárez" (Accessed 22 December 2011. http://escritoresporciudadjuarez.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/escritores-por-ciudad-juarez.html).

Figure 94. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 119).

One of the most noticeable differences between the photograph and the comic illustration is the name of the building. The word "Biblioteca", from the building sign, has been reproduced in Spanish within the image. The word "Independiente", however, has not. Instead, or replacing it, the image includes the term "Independant", which is, somehow, in between Spanish and French. If translated properly into French, the name of the library should have read "Bibliothèque Indépendante" or, if represented as in its original Spanish form, it should have read "Biblioteca Independiente". The description by the authors stating that the building "radiates well-being" is, I think, symptomatic of the discursive issue found in this book aimed at travelling and "collecting" people's dreams all along the way. The comic has turned into the authors' search of gems of hope, just as the young artist is described as "the princess" in the castle she painted or the French citizen Florence Cassez, held since 2005 accused of complicity in kidnapping for her liaison to the leader of a criminal gang is portrayed as a butterfly locked in prison. As it has been explained in the section of this thesis focused on craving and aversion, that in spite of the fact that these authors are not supposed to work as impartial journalists I do find that their premeditated intention of showing the secret gems of hope hidden in violent Mexico and their constant tendency to appease and sweeten reality reveals an extremely polarized scenery that derives in a distorted image.

This place is no longer Ciudad Juarez and it is certainly not a French town either. This is Juarez under the eye of two illustrators that couldn't avoid placing an icon representing a French cultural icon (in the same sense of a Mexican cultural icon), where there had never been one before. The two authors assert to have embarked on this mission in order to discover the "dreams" of Ciudad Juarez, not the violent stories found in newspapers that report what life is like in the most dangerous city in the world. They certainly found an oniric world, their idea of Ciudad Juarez, a subjective perception of their own.

This is exactly the same case of one of the last pages of *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* where Baudoin, most likely without even noticing it, introduced a distinctive Mexican cultural icon, reviewed in detail in the section entitled "Marcos and the Never-Ending Latin American Revolution," the icon of Emiliano Zapata:

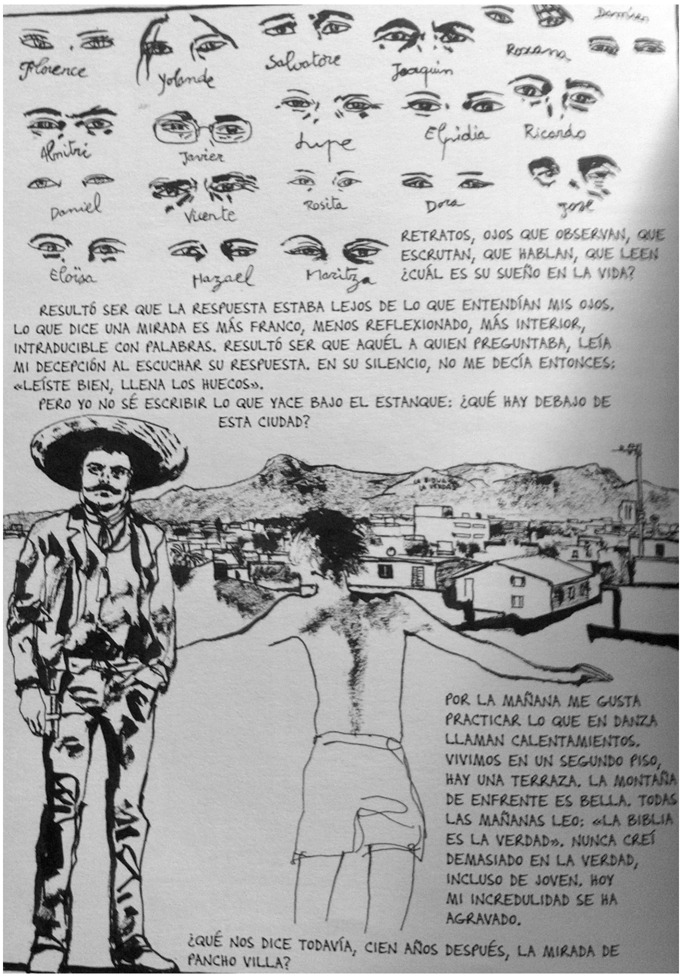


Figure 95. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 122).

Baudoin asks the following question: "What is Pancho Villa's gaze telling us today?" Referring to another Mexican Revolution's great leader whose domain of the north of the country resulted in a key strategy for the armed movement's triumph. So, without a doubt, the link between Villa and the northern area of Mexico that the author is identifying here is completely accurate. The problem is that he is replacing an icon in an erroneous way since

Zapata is to be taken as Villa. This is a tendency of Baudoin —to get caught on his own reveries and preconceptions— as it has been illustrated in the previous section. I consider important to point out how he intersperses the gazes of his dear friends from Mexico with poetic words and memories. This is, indeed, a very good example of Baudoin's out of focus gaze on Ciudad Juarez: there is no solid foundation and not a very competent informant to sustain the oniric world; in this case there is just a notion of a Revolution, just a notion of a leader's image composed by a sombrero and a long moustache. So what this unconscious displacement suggests is that in the collective imaginary it seems to be clear that Mexican Revolution is equivalent to the iconic image of Zapata but, for some reason, Pancho Villa who was just as relevant, and just as photographed, has not got the same international impact.

2.6.3. The Gap in the Market

In the world of comics, the presence of this type of work not only responds to what I find as a genuine interest on behalf of the authors to talk about the gender violence in Ciudad Juarez. The project to create *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* was also partly funded by the cultural grant Stendhal that in the past had also been awarded to another French author who produced a comic book inspired on this same topic, I am referring to Peggy Adam who, thanks to this very same funding, published the fictional story *Luchadoras* (2007). I find it remarkable that she and Maureen Burdock, who also produced a comic inspired in Juarez, entitled *Marta and the Missing* (2010), have never been to Mexico. This implies that their stories are based greatly on pre-conceptions of what lays as "Mexican" within the collective imaginary. As it can be seen with all of the works analyzed in this research, it is not necessarily true that visiting the actual country would eradicate pre-conceptions completely but one could argue that this would be a good place to start with.

As it has been shown in the section called "Urban Displacement" there is a tendency to represent Mexico as a land where everything is permitted and where absolutely no crime will be prosecuted. Partly because of the infamous Ciudad Juarez and the numerous drug cartels, one of the Mexican icons that have transcended the most in the past decades is "insecurity". Hence it might come as a surprise to many people that in spite of the inadmissible impunity in Ciudad Juarez or the numerous deaths associated to drug trafficking and organised crime, not everyone in Mexico can get away with murder and kidnapping. This is directly linked to the authors' mention of the case of the

French citizen, Florence Cassez, who was at that time serving a 60-year prison sentence in Mexico City for her romantic association to the leader of a criminal gang of kidnappers. The following page represents Baudoin and Troub's visit to Cassez:

Figure 96. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 36).

Iconic displacement is verifiable in this page in a number of iconic elements, the first one being the goat signalling Baudoin's point of view. Five French citizens are sitting inside a Mexican prison and Cassez's "dream" is described with key words such as "judge", "injustice" and "brain wash" (panel 1). In the gutter there is an analogy mentioning a boy who has been born in prison but runs around the tables alluding to innocence being imprisoned but not quitting the right to run "freely." As the icon of the turtle indicates, Troub's makes allusion to the baskets of French provisions that have been sent from home, and finally, Florence is represented wearing a necklace with another symbolic icon: a key (panel 2).

Even when the authors allow a space in their comic for Cassez to speak, she talks about her dream and about how other people have been brainwashed without taking the opportunity to explain or to justify her position which, within the context of this comic book, and taking into account the accusations of injustice by both of the authors, starts to feel more than necessary. This need for an explanation still remains present even when Cassez was finally declared innocent in early 2013 under what seemed to be the result of highly political pressure.

“Mexico is regarded like the Medieval carnival where everything is allowed” (Priego 2011, n.p.) asserts Ernesto Priego, whom I interviewed in London. He is not only a Mexican comics scholar resident in the UK but was also Jessica Abel’s cultural assistant for *La Perdida.* He was, in fact, turned into a character in this novel, Ernesto, who helps Carla, the main character, to call police when she is been held as a hostage in her own apartment.

Interestingly, in the fictional case of *La Perdida*, Carla is involved in a somewhat similar situation to that of Cassez. As it has been studied in the section called Illegal United States Citizen in Mexico from the very beginning Carla befriends suspicious people and begins a romantic relationship with Oscar, a man Carla herself recognizes as naïf and not entirely trustworthy. Carla ends up surrounded by criminals who take over her own apartment and, even when she is not completely aware of the bigger picture, she becomes an accessory to the kidnapping of her compatriot Harry.

Abel is capable to recreate a world were characters can be warned about danger, were irregularities are detected and denounced. Carla comes out of the trap thanks to the fact that a Mexican friend who happens to be a decent young man and not a criminal is willing to help, but also because her colleagues at the English school where she works find her behaviour weird and her neighbour is displeased with having suspicious people coming in and out of the building all the time. Carla is not immersed in a completely non-functional world where absolutely everything is allowed and therefore she doesn’t need to be rescued by an equally unbelievable saviour such as a dream catcher. It is actual policemen who show up at her apartment and arrest everyone. She is not presented as an imprisoned butterfly but as an irresponsible young woman who regrets having made the wrong choices such as overstaying her tourist visa and not having listened to the people who were worried about her. In other words, this entirely fictional story reflects with more fidelity than *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* how multi-faceted Mexican society is. This is the result of a longer stay in the country, of a deeper research. Eventough Kuper, Abel and De Isusi show clearly that their role in the country is only that of temporal observers and not permanent residents, their works do reflect a longer and deeper immersion in Mexican culture.

Ironically enough, the French authors close their comic book in a rather different tone, a puerile, fantastic and sublimed atmosphere:

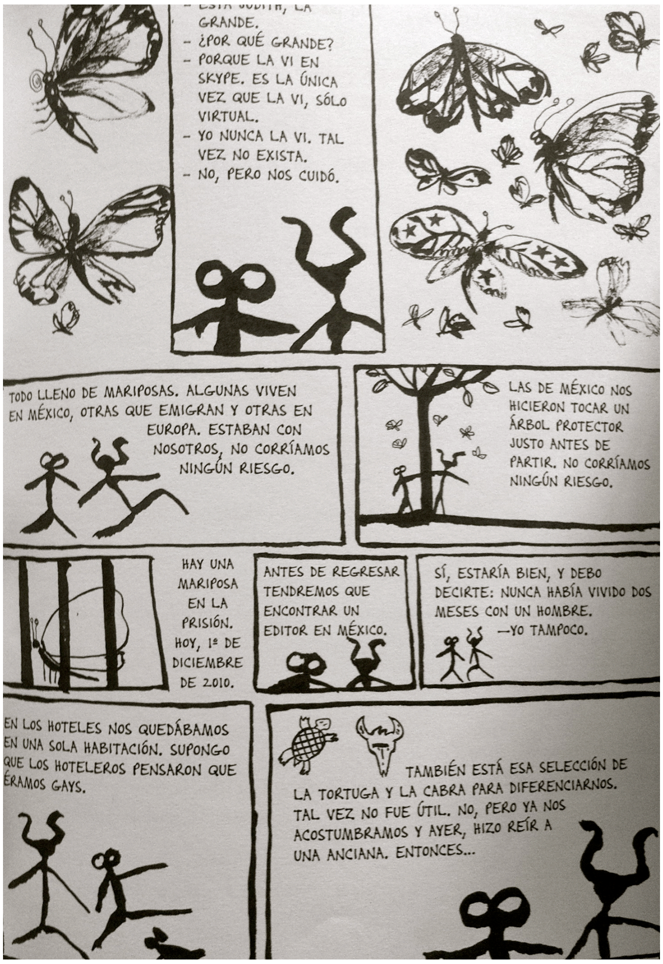


Figure 97. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 123).

They assert to have been protected by dear friends who they represent as butterflies; they refer to a woman named Judith that they have never met so they suggest, in their fantastic superchildish tone "she might not even exist" (panel 1); they also assert that thanks to these butterflies they were able to touch a protective tree that kept them away from all risks (panel 3) and that there is a butterfly who is still in prison, alluding to Florence Cassez (panel 4); with the same puerile tone they also allude to the fact that their iconic strategy to distinguish themselves as a goat and a turtle “might not have been useful (panel 8). The above page, from my point of view, is a summary of the lack of self-criticism found in the whole book. A French citizen in a Mexican jail equals a butterfly deprived from flying but, as I have mentioned before, it has never been explained why or in what way this woman is involved in a serious case of kidnapping and torture, innocent.

I would argue that the reason why this type of comic book is sponsored, published and publicized is because it has found its niche in the market. This book takes on the success of similar comics, it is, for instance, not casual that the designer of the book cover for the Mexican edition is Peter Kuper. In the following pages I would also like to elaborate on the case of other famous comic books that have established thematic and aesthetic trends within the comics industry.

2.6.4. A Displaced Model

In 2000 the Iranian Marjane Satrapi published in France her first work, *Persepolis*, an autobiographical comic. I argue that this book, originally published as a series, was an inaugural narrative that created a replicable model within the comics industry. Several female authors all around the world have taken up Satrapi’s aesthetic canon, and, equally important, numerous publishers and cultural organizations have become aware of the enormous potential that a narrative based on gender violence, war or socio-political conflict, has got to become a successful editorial product. I would argue that this model has propelled the appearance of a few narratives related to Ciudad Juarez and created in a comic book format. In this section I will analyze some of these works and their interconnection with the topic addressed by Baudoin and Troub’s in *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez.*

The story of *Persepolis* begins in 1979, when a 10-year-old Marjane narrates, according to her very witty understanding, the events of growing up in a fundamentalist Islamic regime. Being the daughter of progressive parents, as a teenager she is sent to study in Austria where she also struggles to integrate her world vision with that of her European friends and teachers. Aged 18, Marjane goes back to her home country for a few years where she attends university, gets married at a young age and eventually gets a divorce; there is also in this period a series of tensions and clashes between her system of beliefs as a young adult partially raised in Europe and those imposed not only by the regime but also by society in everyday life circumstances. As an adult, Marjane finally decides to settle in France. It was there where her comics, created as a series, appeared for the first time.

The narrative style in *Persepolis* is transformed in each volume not only according to the author's represented age but it is also noticeable how her graphic style gradually became more skilful and sophisticated. Satrapi's distinctive minimalistic panels in black and white, as well as her bold testimonial of a long silenced protest brought into the contemporary comics scene a new range of both thematic and stylistic possibilities. It is worthy of mention that one of Satrapi's greatest achievements is to immerse the reader in her childhood world in Iran or her adolescent mind in Austria without ever needing to make use of localisms or code-switching. There is a total suspension of disbelief on behalf of the reader. As Priego asserts:

> Last June [2011] Marjane Satrapi gave a talk at the Barbican and she was asked why the film adaptation of *Persepolis* hadn't been made in Persian, her native language, and she replied that this was a joint collaboration with French filmmakers and that she has been living in France for several years now and she has even become French citizen. So when you watch the film it is not a big issue, even if you watch it in English you do understand that they are supposed to be speaking a foreign language. It is like looking at something red that reads "green", that's a fascinating visual cognitive problem. (Priego 2011, n.p.).

One could argue that in the current comics scene there is something that could be catalogued as the "*Persepolis* effect." A few female authors have echoed Satrapi's work with both fictional and autobiographical works presenting empowered female characters that narrate their experiences through different wars and or violent scenarios. A couple of examples of this could be *A Game for Swallows* (2008) by Zeina Abirached and *Bye Bye Babylon Beirut 1975-1979* (2012) by Lamia Ziadé. Both authors are Lebanese and, just like Satrapi, they have found in Europe the platform to publish their works narrating their experiences of war in their home country.

Luchadoras (2007), by the French author Peggy Adam, is a fictional novel inspired in gender violence in Ciudad Juarez. As I have mentioned before, there are a few works of fiction focused in portraying empowered female characters linked to Ciudad Juarez. Adam and Maureen Burdock are two female authors that have never been to Mexico, let alone, Juarez, and have produced a couple of graphic novels with the aid of several cultural organizations. Like the authors of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*, Adam also received the Stendhal scholarship and was therefore indebted to produce her book in a very reduced period of time. A significant aspect of this novel, for the purposes of this thesis, is that her aesthetic and narrative style is evidently influenced by Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis.* To briefly illustrate this characteristic, I present the following comparison between panels taken from *Persepolis*, *Luchadoras* and *A Game for Swallows*:

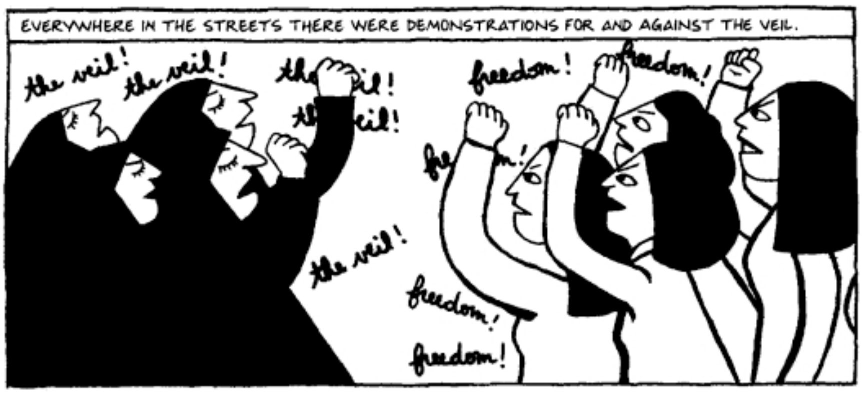


Figure 98. Satrapi, Marjane (2003) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 5).

Figure 99. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido, 38).

Figure 100. Abirached, Zeina (2012) *A Game for Swallows*: *To Die, to Leave, to Return* (New York: Graphic Universe, 28).

The handwriting style in order to represent the collective voice, the contrasting effect of black and white and the voices of young people who, in spite of growing in a rather threatening environment, still behave and react as common people, are among the elements that these three panels share. Although I do think that Adam and Abirached do have a genuine motivation to relate their own stories, I consider that the international success of *Persepolis* has increased, notoriously in France, and in the rest of the world, the publishing houses and cultural organizations' interest to promote this type of narratives. In addition, judging by their rather non-risky style, with simple planes, minimalistic conventions, mono-sequential pages and simplistic representation of movement, emotions, environments or metaphors, I would like to argue that these books do not present the most revolutionary techniques of storytelling in comics.

Regarding the importance of a multiplicity of levels of representation within a comic book page, Nericcio has declared that this is something very distinctive of great authors such as Gilbert Hernandez, David B or "Chris Ware who could show fourteen different time sequences in one page" (Nericcio 2011, n.p.) and this is a very remarkable way to consciously create a world of conflicts and tensions, not only mentioning it. According to Nericcio, the authors abovementioned are so remarkable because of their ability to tell multifaceted stories, as Borges did. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.) A meta-narrative, achieved both graphically and textually would make comic books such as those concatenated by "the Persepolis effect" much more transcendent and innovative.

In fact, I argue that even the book covers' art aims to consolidate a certain readership, avid to this kind of story with empowered women fighting for their rights in repressive and violent contexts and distinctive minimalistic art. This is easy to spot from the very cover of the books, here is a comparative example:

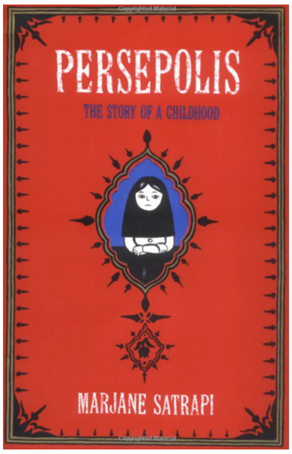


Figure 101. Satrapi, Marjane (2003) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books).

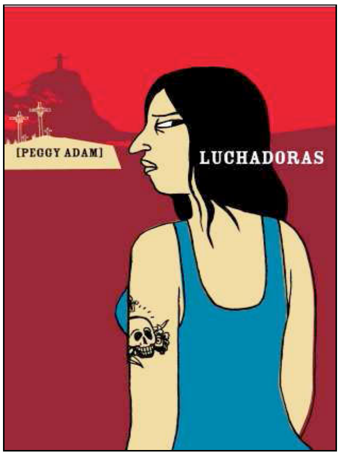


Figure 102. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido).

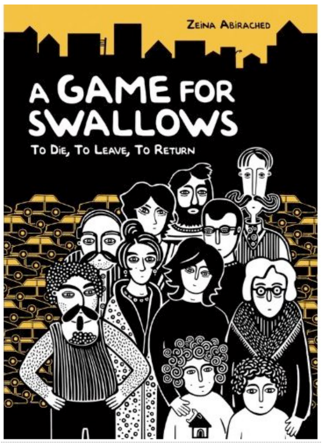


Figure 103. Abirached, Zeina (2012) *A Game for Swallows*: *To Die, to Leave, to Return* (New York: Graphic Universe).

Given the fact that all of these narratives have been very successful in France, it does not come as a surprise that *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* was produced as a book very much fitting the French Ministry of Culture agenda. I would argue that this comic book would have been much better developed if there had not been such hurry to finish it.

There is a sense of insatisfaction to it, a sense of missing pages, missing the point. During our interview, Baudoin seemed to confirm this perception:

> I am never completely satisfied with a book. Never. There will always be missing about fifty pages. For example, if you ask me what scared me the most about Juarez, I can say that I was afraid when I realized that my presence was frightening to a child that ran into the arms of his mother when he looked at me because a foreigner does not exist in Ciudad

> Juarez. That made me feel very scared. This is something that I did not include in the book. I do not know why. And if I ever redo the book I would include it: I was the greatest fear, the fear of that child. (Baudoin 2011, n.p.).

It is not the case that two experienced authors like Baudoin and Troub's were new at producing comic books of zones of conflict and travelling abroad. They both have a longer trajectory than Adam or Abirached. Baudoin has witnessed other violent scenarios in his travels around the world so I asked him if he could relate what he found in Juarez to other situations that he is aware of. In spite of my many criticisms to his comic book and how it takes on a global trend, as seen in the case of *Persepolis*, I completely agree with what Baudoin described to me as his vision of war and current violence in Mexico and the rest of the world:

> I was in the war in Beirut, Lebanon. Today wars are strange. There may be quiet and everything suddenly changes. We are here having a coffee in an interview and suddenly in the street "bang, bang, bang!" someone dies. Wars are no longer as we imagine. Wars are small settings where people die. And we can be here talking about the latest brand of car or how we dress and someone dies suddenly across the street. It's weird. Strange. (Baudoin 2011, n.p.).

This reminds me of *Waltz with Bashir. A Lebanon War Story* (2009) a documentary by two Israeli authors and filmmakers, Ari Folman and David Polonsky. This comic book is the adaptation of what first came out as a film in 2008 directed by Folman who in 1982 was a serving soldier in the refugee camp in Beirut where the Christian militia performed a massacre -of potentially thousands- of Palestinians. Thirty years after, Folman is baffled to realize that he has completely forgot where he was and what he had been doing exactly when the brutal attack took place. So he begins a journey of remembrance asking fellow veterans and digging into what appears to be a collective amnesia. The protagonist nails the cause of such forgetfulness when he remembers being back in Israel after serving the army and he recognizes that something about wars had shifted completely:

> When I came home from Lebanon for the first time in six weeks, life was going on as normal. I thought about how when I was a kid, there was a war going on and everything had come to a halt. The fathers were all away on the front line. The children stayed indoors with their mothers waiting for a plane to

> fly over and drop a bomb on everyone. Now, no one seemed to put their life on hold, and I was kind of the same way. (Folman and Polonsky 2009, 63).

Figure 104. Folman, Ari, Polonsky, David (2009) *Waltz with Bashir. A Lebanon War Story.* (London: Atlantic Books, 63).

The soldier, as an iconic figure of war, is depicted walking around the city still in his uniform (panel 1) in a context where life seems to carry on happily. All sorts of civilians, from an old woman to children and young people, walk freely in the sunny streets and enjoy ice-cream or milkshakes. This is the moment when the soldier plunges in the continuation of everyday life and decides to leave war behind. Nevertheless, the two panels shown above demonstrate that normal life has irreversibly been permeated by war: the soldier's bloodstains are the necessary price to be paid in order to keep this merry scenario going (panel 1) but they are also a warning of the possible revenge that may be thrown upon these tranquil streets, so the young woman walking by and the people sitting in the terrace are in fact "waiting for a plane to fly over and drop a bomb on everyone" (panel 2).

What I find most interesting about this comic book is the complexity of the role played by each one of the parties involved in this war. It challenges and displaces cultural icons and archetypes associated with the role of the "victim" and the "victimizer" within a conflict as intricate as the one between Christians, Palestinians and Jews described in this documentary. Its enormous value is that it is a very honest, and therefore very ethically narrated, testimonial. As Judith Butler asserts:

> No political ethics can start from the assumption that Jews monopolise the position of victim. "Victim" is a quickly transposable term: it can shift from minute to minute, from the Jew killed by suicide bombers on a bus to the Palestinian child killed by Israeli gunfire. The public sphere needs to be one in which both kinds of violence are challenged insistently and in the name of justice. (Butler 2003).

Taking the above example into account, I would argue that my main issue with *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* or with the other books mentioned in this section that have taken on the *Persepolis* model, is them not having been able of transforming their works into multi-level narratives. As I have mentioned in section called From Oaxaca to Wonderland to New York in the case of Kuper's *Diaro de Oaxaca,* simultaneity is a key aesthetic aspect of a comic book.

CHAPTER 3:

Analyzing the Creative Process

The objective of this final chapter's is to provide a more complete view of the context in which the works, authors and artistic movements operate. With this purpose I am including as part of my argumentation five interviews I carried out during the time invested in my research. The full transcript of the interviews is interspersed with pictures, notes, references and my own critical comments on the issues that the interviewees mention and their relevance for the present study. Thus, the following sections aim not only to present supplementary material but also to elaborate on equally important external factors that increase the possibilities of iconic displacement within these books including aspects related to the creative process of comics as well as editing and translation issues. The interviews are also testimonials of further permeable boundaries intervening in the creation and dissemination of comics such as the relationship between the authors and the editors, these books' readership and their niche in the popular culture scene in and outside of Mexico.

The chapter is divided in two main sections. The first one, called "Creators in a Foreign Land", covers the conversations with two of the authors that have produced some of the comic books analyzed in this thesis: Edmond Baudoin and Peter Kuper. The sub section, called "The Revealed Picture", I present the interview with Edmond Baudoin focusing the discussion on the fact that he defines his work based on Ciudad Juarez as a realistic portrait of a city and the methodology followed by him and Troub's while working together in the production of their book which, according to Baudoin, was like "screening" the reality of a city. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, this is what I consider to be a problematic notion, and the course of this conversation illustrates more in detail what Baudoin intended to achieve with this work and what he considers to have missed out of the "picture".

That conversation is followed by my interview with the author Peter Kuper who explains in detail the links he found between street art in Oaxaca and that of New York City and the role that politics play as his main object of representation in spite of the fact of his interests on other subjects that he describes to be as less unpleasant than socio-political conflicts. In order to clearly illustrate his focus, I make a brief comment on the case of the collective Mexican group *Lapiztola* and Kuper's allusion to it and other similar movements.

The second section of the present chapter is titled “Scholarly Readers” and, as its name suggests, it is dedicated to a series of conversations with three scholars and authors, located in Mexico, UK and the United States, that work with comic books and Latin American visual art. The first one is Dr. William Anthony Nericcio, born in Arizona and based in California; he works as Professor of English and Comparative Literature and is the Director of the MA in Liberal Arts and Sciences at San Diego State University. His academic work is based on the field of American Literature as well as Latin American, Chicana/Chicano, Film and Cultural Studies. He is the author of various works in Latino culture, including the book *Tex{t}-Mex. Seductive Hallucinations of the “Mexican” in America*. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, his theory on Xicanosmosis has been fundamental for the present study and discussing with him the works of Abel and other artists, such as Lalo Alcaraz or Gilbert Hernandez, helps situate the topic of Mexicanity within contemporary comics and visual art very clearly.

The next interviewee is Dr. Ernesto Priego, born in Mexico City and based in London, UK; he has got a PhD in Information Studies (University College London) and a background in cultural studies (UEA Norwich) and English literature (UNAM). His research and work is mainly based in the areas of graphic and multimodal narrative studies, digital innovation and material culture. Priego worked as Jessica Abel’s cultural assistant in the creation of *La Perdida* and translated this novel into Spanish for Astiberri’s edition in 2006. Our conversation is focused on the lack of contemporary Mexican authors interested in addressing national socio-political issues on the comic book format. We also discuss the case of *La Perdida*, *Un verano insolente* and other novels and comics that illustrate foreign authors producing comics that make use of Mexican Cultural Icons.

The last interview is a conversation with the scriptwriter and publisher, Francisco de la Mora, who has a background in Latin American Literature (Universidad Iberoamericana). In 2002 he co-founded Editorial Sexto Piso, the Mexican editorial house that published some of the main works by Peter Kuper, Troub’s and Edmond Baudoin studied in this thesis. Since 2009, De la Mora works as independent author and editor based in Mexico City. Our discussion is focused on the editorial decisions that he has made to publish works such as *Diario de Oaxaca* or his most recent series of Mexican History presented in the comic book format.

All of the abovementioned central topics addressed in each one of the interviews are included in this chapter. This has been done not only as a way to present supplementary material but also in order to elaborate on equally important external factors that increase the possibilities of Mexican Iconic Displacement within these books, including aspects related to the creative process of comics as well as editing and translation issues. The interviews are also testimonials of further permeable boundaries intervening in the creation and dissemination of comics such as the relationship between the authors and the editors, these books' readership and their niche in the popular culture scene in and outside of Mexico.

3.1. Creators in a Foreign Land[7]

In spite of the fact that I didn't find it indispensable to hold personal interviews with all of the authors studied in this thesis — mainly because I have always regarded the formal analysis of their actual works as the most crucial aspect of my thesis — I do consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to speak with two of them directly while they both were attending promoting events in Mexico in 2011.

3.1.1. The Revealed Picture

Interview conceded by Edmond Baudoin on the 20th of May 2011 in Mexico City

How would you describe Ciudad Juarez now that you have been there?

People are usually very afraid of Juarez since it is said to be a city of death. But it didn't take long for us to find out that this is also a city of life for all of the people who live there.

Would you assert that your current vision of the city replaced a pre-conceived one?

When we travelled from Mexico City to Juarez, people were really afraid to let us go and asked us to be ultra-careful and gave us lots of warnings. Therefore, when we finally got to Juarez, it was surprising for us not to find anything extraordinary. We were half-expecting to feel as if we were entering into another world. It is much simpler than people usually imagine because life

---

[7] The following interviews with the comic book authors Edmond Baudoin and Peter Kuper were carried out with the support of the staff from the Mexican cultural newspapers *+cultura* and *Lee+* and were only possible thanks to the valuable help of Editor-in-Chief and CEO of Bhukti Publishing House, Yara Vidal.

goes on there. The heart still beats, people are still feeling hungry everyday or you can see the girls and boys carrying on with their lives and demonstrating that life goes on! So there is not much difference from Mexico City.

Except for the fact that currently there are troops from both the Mexican and the United States army patrolling the city?

Yes, you do hear the sounds of the police sirens a little more often and, yes you find army vehicles patrolling around more frequently but there's really nothing more than that.

Nevertheless Ciudad Juarez has been a strategic scenario of the so-called "Mexico drug war"? Do you think it resembles other violent places or situations that you have witnessed in your travels?

I was in the war in Beirut, Lebanon. Today wars are strange. There may be quiet and everything suddenly changes. We are here having a coffee in an interview and suddenly in the street "bang, bang, bang!" someone dies. Wars are no longer as we imagine. Wars are small settings where people die. And we can be here talking about the latest brand of car or how we dress and someone dies suddenly across the street. It's weird. Strange.

In addition to the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, author of *2666*, can you think of examples of Mexican authors that have influenced your work?

Those that now come to mind are Sergio Pitol, Carlos Fuentes and, of course, I have now read lots and lots of Paco Ignacio Taibo II.

And what about international writers?

One that comes to my mind as an important book is *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth.

How long did it take to produce this comic book and how many people were involved in this process?

It took two years between the time I decided to come to the border and the day I arrived in Mexico.

The people involved were a cultural entity based in France, Jean Marc Troubet and myself.

Had you ever worked with another author before?

No. It was the first time I worked with another person. He had other books with other people but this experience was the first time for me and it was a very good one.

Why did you choose to work with Jean Marc Troubet? What was the link between the two of you?

I have known Jean Marc for many years, he is a traveller, a great traveller, and well, we are two travellers together. So there was a certain brotherhood between us even though we didn’t always share the same worldview.

I wonder if part of the intention of both of you as authors was to produce a travel book reproducing the model employed by Troub’s? What would you call it?

Setting up a projector on a landscape, a population, over a city. It is like a picture revealed.

What about those things that were left out of the picture?

I am never completely satisfied with a book. Never. There will always be missing about fifty pages. For example, if you ask me what scared me the most about Juarez, I can say that I was afraid when I realized that my presence was frightening to a child that ran into the arms of his mother when he looked at me because a foreigner does not exist in Ciudad Juarez. That made me feel very scared. This is something that I did not include in the book. I do not know why. And if I ever redo the book I would include it: I was the greatest fear, the fear of that child.

So this book is like your personal portrait of a city rather than a piece of journalism?

I do not know if it's journalism, I do not know what the exact word would be. In the past we used to define work under a determinate category or definition, we could say “there's a journalist,” “there's an artist or a writer,” but today everything is mixed a little. The journalist is both a writer and a designer at the same time, everything is permeated.

What is your technique? Do you work with photographs that you take into your studio?

When I create a book I like to illustrate it in the same environment. If I draw a picture here of you and me, this is where we are, it is not in my house. After I return to my studio a few things remain to be done but this is where I noticed them, where I draw them in the first place. It is very important.

3.1.2. Politics in the Times of Comics

Interview conceded by Peter Kuper on the 4th of October 2011 in Mexico City.

Why has it always been so important for your creative work to keep a personal sketchbook?

I can't help myself wherever I am I want to draw the circumstances and my experiences. It is my way of experiencing where I am and drawing in my sketchbook is my way to draw art without any sense of where I am going to sell it or the commerce of it, it is just personal so I've been recording my time in New York since I got there over 30 years ago.

As an artist why do you have the need to constantly change from one style to the other and how do you make your different choices?

It is my personality I just get bored very quickly and to do one style just seems like a repetition. To me is like clothing: if you wear the same clothes everyday you would start to smell so I just get to a point where I've done a certain type of work and even for that matter some of it is only biographical and some of it is my imagination. If I did one piece that had lots of words in it then the next piece might have no words at all and some of it is illustrations and some of it is sketchbooking and some of it is painting and I hope that by putting all that together I achieve this kind of "mezcla" [mix].

Your decision to live in an old colonial city like Oaxaca was in response to the fact that you were living in a big metropolis like New York? How was the process of choosing the destination for your sabbatical leave?

I have a daughter and my wife and I wanted her to learn a second language and Spanish is a perfect choice after Mandarin-Chinese. So we looked around for different places where we might live, we decided that since we were living in a big city, New York, we should live somewhere that were smaller. We went to Spain and it seemed like very expensive. We thought Mexico City is too big, so we visited Oaxaca a couple of times and it was just a lucky guess as it turned out to be so perfect.

How has Oaxaca permeated your aesthetic depiction of New York? Have you displaced any iconic language from your experience of Oaxaca into the space of New York?

When I got back from Mexico I had spent so much time drawing in my sketchbook then that I continued to do that. Only now I was drawing in New York with the influences of Oaxaca and that created a different view of New York for me and I was talking to my editors about the possibility of the next book continuing the “diario idea en Nueva York” [journal idea in New York]. So I looked in all the different work I created over that time but I also started creating new work. So I spent three years drawing in my sketchbook all the time and looking at what I had and seeing what was missing from the picture that I wanted to create that would demonstrate how I feel about New York which is a very large spectrum of sometimes very dark things and sometimes, I hope, beautiful things.

How are these stylistic transitions visible in the art of *Drawn to New York*?

New York is all about change and to capture it, to express that change one style would be kind of missing parts of it. So my earlier work was more in black and white and it captured a certain aspect of my experience but it definitely needed colour. Watercolours are good but then I also had the influence of graffiti. I started doing stencils and things that were more graphic and I brought that into it. I thought it would show a broader sense of New York which represents so many different cultures and so many different ideas all pushed together in this one tiny island.

What is the advantage of drawing on paper?

I’ve done some animation and I have explored that area. But I am old fashioned in the way that I still love books and I just love that form. I love to hold something in my hand and smell the ink. It is a tactile experience that is missing from new technology.

One thing that I love about doing books and just drawing for myself is that is not a commodity and the more the technology moves in a way where, if I can do everything myself, the more likely I find myself doing that. But I like the simplicity of just drawing on paper and maybe scanning and sending it somewhere and occasionally when I’ve done that it’s gotten out in much broader ways.

Can you give a concrete example of a case like this while creating *Diario de Oaxaca*?

The drawings I did in Oaxaca I was sending them to France and then somebody posted them on their website and then that was seen by somebody who ended up doing an article in *Reforma* about me being in Oaxaca and I just thought: “Oh is a big circular world!” with all of these connections… and I did something very simple but it then transformed that way and I am always interested to do that.

Was it possible for you to find the same sort of connections with New York while living in a city like Oaxaca?

In a certain way street art was one of the key connections that I saw between the two cities. There’s a lot of things that are not the same, obviously, Oaxaca is a small town and is very old and New York is newer and huge but the graffiti was definitely one of the things that connected them, you know groups like *Arte Jaguar* and *Asaro* and this amazing beautiful street art that was responding to what was happening politically I felt completely related to it.

That was one of the aspects of being in Oaxaca, the way people were using art to express themselves with these political themes, that made me feel that here I was in another place were people felt the same urgency to use art that way so I just felt a great association with it and it was very inspiring.

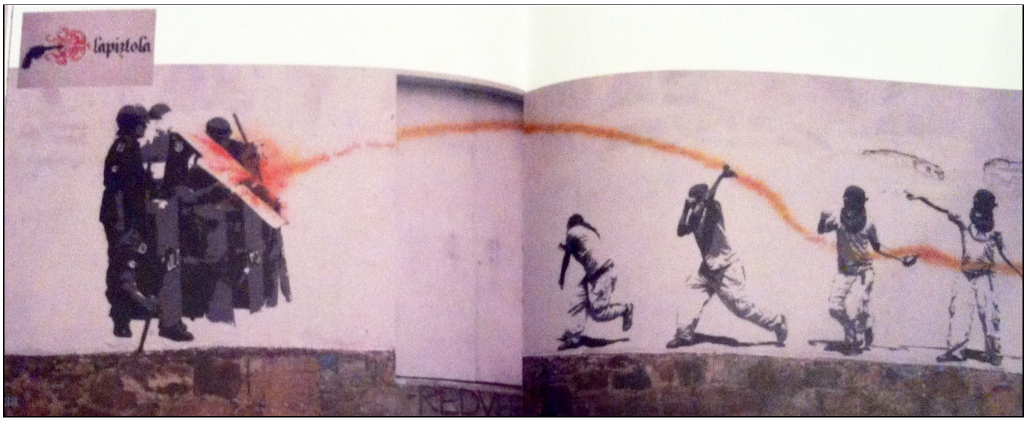


Figure 105. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 138-139).

Figure 105 is an illustration that appears as a double page spread in *Diario de Oaxaca*; it captures the work of an urban intervention painted in a large wall by the artistic collective called Lapiztola, which is a playful name mixing two words “lápiz” [pencil] and “pistola” [gun]. The group emerged in response to the political movements that Kuper witnessed while living in Oaxaca in 2006. In this picture a single protester is depicted in four different movements in front of a group of riot policemen. Lapiztola has continued producing similar urban art and carrying exhibitions in different galleries and museums in Mexico and the United States. It is not difficult to relate this type of urban protesting art as an echo of the works of artists like Banksy, not only because of the resemblance between their aesthetic canon, but also for the sense of revealing against something while establishing a connection with the viewer which is, in most cases, a civilian affected by the alluded conflict

Are there other similarities or cultural identifiers that the two urban spaces have in common? Are the creative process and your drawing technique alike in both places?

I did something about the smells of New York and the smells of Oaxaca. A dead animal or food on the street are very much part of the experience so I'd like to think that the sounds and the smells are part of what ends up in the drawings. What you see in *Diario de Nueva York* and *Diario de Oaxaca* is that. When I was drawing on the street and there was the impact of it being a hot day and maybe me not being comfortable at so many walks in front of my drawing, it was these changes and other influences that made the drawings more complicated than what they would ever be if I sat down and look at a photograph and tried to copy it. It would never have had any of that in it.

What about political resemblances? Do you think there are icons that work equally in both cultural domains?

It was a time in 2006 when we were on the second term of George Bush's presidency and we very much wanted a "escape" so we arrived in Oaxaca thinking that we were going to get away from it all in a small town just in time for the PFP [Federal Preventive Police] to arrive and have this exploding situation there with the "manifestación de los maestros" [teacher's demonstration]

I realized I wasn't trying to escape I just wanted something else and I draw about political topics all the time. So this was an opportunity to explore a completely different culture but still political and get the influence of the art of Oaxaca and Mexico in general and I found it, it turned my mind in so many different directions that I am still in the process of digesting the information.

These criticisms are also very visible in your work illustrating *Alice in Wonderland*…

Alice was a challenge but it was also a welcomed opportunity to apply what I was doing in Oaxaca in my sketchbook and then doing it in illustration and spend a period of time with material like that because is such a classic. Interestingly there's a subtext that's political, the original book had the works of the artist John Tenniel who drew the political figures of his time as the characters and so it was a perfect opportunity for me to then use current political figures. So the rabbit if you look closer it looks a little bit like Clinton, or the "gato" [cat] is Richard Nixon. Reagan makes an appearance and so does Dick Cheney and the mad hatter fits just too perfectly with George Bush so I was able to bring some of those aspects in.

Is it important for you that the reader is able to decode those political glimpses or do you think there is something transcendent enough within the first level of the narrative?

I felt that I was talking about the current times. But it wasn't important to me actually if you looked at the book and didn't know who they were, it gave it sort of a quality of a real person and if you recognize it, great, it gives it a deeper quality and if you do not, it doesn't really matter.

3.2. Scholarly Readers[8]

In the following sections I present a transcript of what I found to be very enlightening conversations with three active contemporary scholars and editors whose works, research and contributions to the fields of cultural studies and Mexican popular culture are very relevant for the purpose of this thesis.

3.2.1. Mexican Semiotic Costumes

Interview conceded by Dr. William Anthony Nericcio on the 9th of June 2011 in San Diego, California.[9]

What you usually find in Europe as "Mexican" — from food to costumes — is often influenced or permeated by the Chicano interpretation and appropriation of Mexicanity that has been exported from the United States. What do you think of this process?

This is interesting because, if what you are saying is true, then it is a completed circle. In *Tex{t}-Mex* one of the things that I look at is how American

---

[8] The following sections of this thesis were only made possible thanks to the "precious little help" of all the interviewees.

[9] Dr. William Anthony Nericcio, born in Arizona and based in California, works as Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the MA in Liberal Arts and Sciences at San Diego State University. His academic work is based in the field of American Literature as well as Latin American, Chicana/Chicano, Film and Cultural Studies. He is the author of various works in Latino culture including the book *Tex{t}-Mex.Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America*.

stereotyped visions of Mexicans is a version of the English attitude towards the Spanish. And a lot of the archetypes were established in the wars between England and Spain. So you have the children of English and Spanish language countries, as it is the case of the United States and Mexico, recreating the heating and the loading. A lot of the attitudes of the English against the Spanish become recreated in Anglo-American attitudes towards Mexicans. And this really explodes during the Mexican Revolution and the border cross between the United States and Mexico.

So is this a question of displacing archetypes from one culture to the other?

The idea of “Latinos are unclean” resembles the British when they complain about the Spanish, they still complain when they go on vacation to Ibiza or something. The kind of jokes that you see in a British pub are parallel to those of an anti-Mexican Arizona gringo racist. That is what’s fascinating: these archetypes are transferable. They translate. The introduction of my book is about this translation and the common denominator is national conflict so I talk about stereotypes being like bloodstains in the way that you can’t get rid of them but also because usually people make fun of other people because they’ve been in war with them. So the United States was in war with Mexico, Spain and England have a long history of blood too.

In addition, there is also a colonial vision coming from Spain regarding Latin America…

Absolutely, just like you have intrastate and interstate highways, you also have intra-stereotypes and inter-stereotypes. The intra-state relationship between Spain to Latin America brings into play other stereotypes that need to be studied almost externally. And then there is the history of the relationship between Spain “después de la conquista” [after the Conquest] with “América Latina” [Latin America]. Now England and the United States have a different special relationship, that’s also because of war. In World War II, the Alliance was their special relationship. But, at the worst period of the Bush years, I would see it on my trips to London, there was a visible anti-Americanism within England.

So is there always a visible duality in these relationships?

Across media from television into comics from comics into advertising from the movies into our imagination. My work is all about tracking the evolution of hate as manifest in popular entertainment. We do not think of popular entertainment as hate but conflict is there, conflict and desire which is why the Mexican bandit is a negative stereotype but not everybody is uncomfortable with the idea of Latinos as great lovers. They travel together.

Can you describe the constant negotiation between these two poles of attraction and repulsion?

There are tensions. So much of the immigrant experiences is re-establishing new identities in the new context. But my problem with that is for example, writers such as Carlos Fuentes who uses the metaphor of a wound or Gloria Anzaldúa who speaks of an open wound. In *Tex{t}-Mex* I talk about the process of *Xicanosmosis*, for me that's better, I was going to be an oncologist so I love the biological metaphor. What I see happen at the border really is osmosis, the same thing that happens in the lungs, the movement to semi-permeable boundaries substance, that's what you find between Mexico and the United States. And it blows both ways.

Do you think that the process of Xicanosmosis is a constant in the works of Mexican-American contemporary cartoonists?

For instance in Lalo Alcaraz's work you look at how "el Chapulín Colorado" figures now in his paintings and you see the Xicanosmosis:

Figure 106. Alcaraz, Lalo. 2011. “Happy Birthday To The Mas Badass Mexican Artist Ever: DIEGO RIVERA”. Accessed on 31 October 2012.

http://laloalcaraz.com/happy-birthday-to-the-mas-badass-mexican-artist-ever-diego-rivera/chilinfrida-diego

The above satirical cartoon “paying homage” to Diego Rivera on the anniversary of his birth juxtaposes a popular culture television icon with one of Frida Kahlo’s most celebrated self-portraits from 1931 titled “Frida Kahlo y Diego Rivera;” and a popular television show El Chapulín Colorado. This is the name of the main character of a Mexican television series -*El Chavo del Ocho* which eventually became *Chespirito*- created in the 1970’s and broadcasted until the mid 1990’s. The humorist show was distinctive for its various uses of riddles and coded play on words, became immensely popular in all Latin America, including Brazil where it was translated into Portuguese. Lalo Alcaraz, the prollific Mexican-American political cartoonist, born in San Diego in 1964 is the author of the multi-awarded comic strip *La Cucaracha* [The Coakcroach] published regularly in dozens of newspapers in the United States since 2002. Alcaraz situates both domains in the same level because, within the United States, El Chavo or Diego and Frida are equally regarded as Mexican. It is also revealing that, whereas the national creative scene from Mexico in the early 20th century is identified with worldwide famous painters, the latter decades are more related to comedy and soap opera characters, as it is also exemplified in the case of *Life Sucks*.

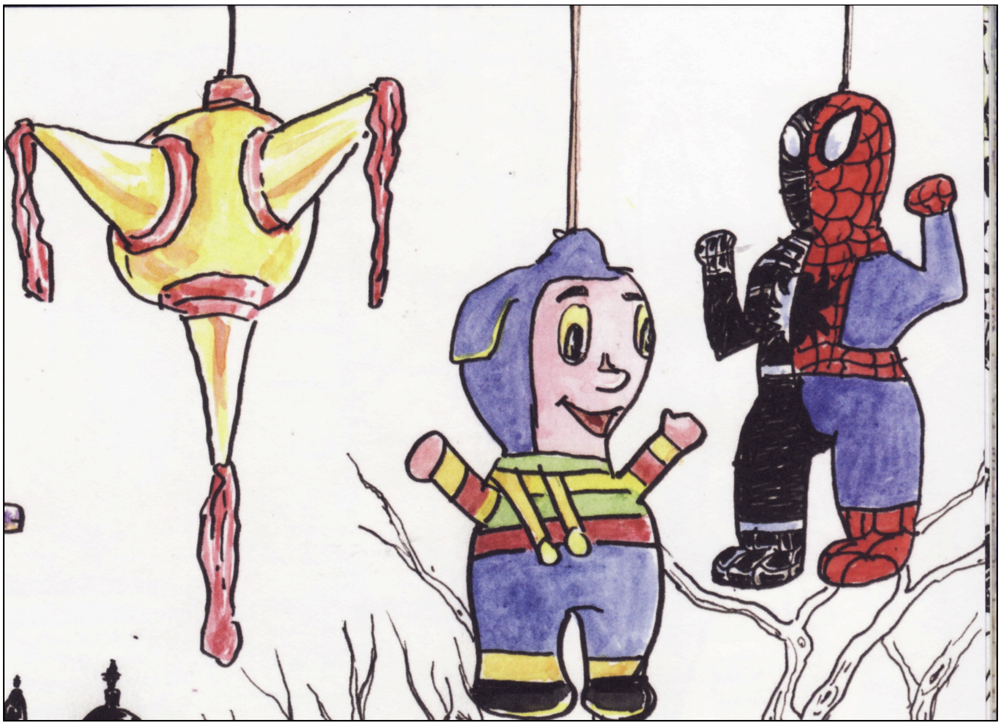


Figure 107. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 101).

Peter Kuper also makes allusion to El Chavo. In **Figure 107** the author depicts a view of a piñata market stall. The most traditional piñata, represented by the yellow star on the left, embodies what could be regarded as Mexicanity in one of its most classic forms. On the right, the allusion to one of the biggest North American superheroes, Spider-Man, is not casual. The figure of El Chavo, situated in the middle, is a reminder that this character also parodied superheroes. This juxtaposition of tradition, a United States superheroe and a humoristic version of a Mexican national hero that trascended to all Latin America, resonates with Carlos Monsiváis' observation of Mexican comics during the first years of the 20th Century: the use of localisms and national distictiveness were a common resource in order to "fight back" the immenent invasion of foreign fictional characters, authors and creators.

What about the Hernandez brothers who are also Mexican-American graphic storytellers?

If you look at Gilbert Hernandez, he works with the pre-Columbian cultures not just from Mexico but he fuses them: Inca, Mayan, Cholula and you get them all in his figures. So there is this sort of pan-latino-semiotic-indigenismo in his work and he is from California.

Do you think Jessica Abel achieves something similar?

Jessica Abel's work in *La perdida* is fascinating because this is a sustained re-visioning of the "gente" [people] through alien eyes. She nails something; she is got a good eye.

And it works both ways you can see the impact of American inventions of television on Televisa and Multivisión, people with fair skin, "indigenismo" is got to be erased. I like to look at the transfer of cultural material across borders.

What do you think of the different editorials decisions made in relation to the use of English and Spanish throughout the novel?

I think the Spanish edition it's another text. Jessica needs to have it re-translated in Mexico.

As for the original bilingual edition I would say I do not think it works as well as it works in Gilbert's [Hernandez]. Gilbert seems to understand, is like he invented a convention. In Abel's it is very distracting but in Gilbert's the convention really works. It is very interesting how we depict that people are using that language.

Do you distinguish a process of transformation in *La Perdida* in relation to the outsider's eye of Jessica Abel and how she renders Mexico?

Jessica gets tired of her vision of Mexico, she gets tired of the book and it ends in fatigue not just in catastrophe. Is like "I wanna finish". The beginning and the end of the book are like two different arts.

What about the transformation of Carla, the main character who is depicted as a young adult in search of herself?

Yes, it has elements of a *buildungsroman* and a stranger in a strange land. Two of the most classic forms of a novel. Coming of age story and the stranger in a strange land put together. Your coming of age in the alien territory. That's a good recipe for telling a story. If you're going to make a movie, there's your plot.

And this sort of classic plot is narrated using words and pictures. Can you describe the reading process and the relation between visual form and this kind of narrative content in contemporary comics?

Comic book artists like Gilbert Hernandez, David B. or Chris Ware are very much like Borges. It is just that these are individuals who happen to work in a funky medium, comics, that are able to tell stories that are multifaceted. They can do it with words and images. Peter Greenaway's *Pillow Book* could be compared to Chris Ware's narratives. They are storytellers of their moment. These are post-post-modern meta-narratives from the late 20th century early 21st century. But they also make us see that comics are plastic. They present a plastic reading and not only a merely mimetic reading.

Could you give an example of a Mexican icon represented in comics under the eye of this plastic reading?

When Gilbert does the life story of Frida Kahlo, he reinvents Frida Kahlo. He rescues Frida from Diego Rivera; he cannot stand Kahlo as the tragic victim. Gilbert read Herrera's biography with one eye and Kahlo through her paintings with the other eye.

What about Lucha Libre [Mexican wrestling] as a live spectacle, what kind of reading do you make of it as a visual show?

I did an interview with Carlos Avila; he is doing a documentary on Lucha Libre. Apparently I am an expert on that too. But I am not [laughs].

It is theatre for the masses, "teatro" [theatre] for the working class and that is very true in Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, or here in the outskirts of the city, it is something for an audience that certain groups of Mexicans would describe as "la chusma" [the rabble] but the workers go there and they love it. It is like the Greek gods with the masks, the good guys and the bad guys.

What happens when icons like El Santo or Frida Kahlo are displaced to kitschy fashion objects like t-shirts or handbags that you can buy in a fancy neighbourhood in Mexico City, London or Los Angeles?

Yeah these are cultural markers for the fashion industry to be sold in stores.

And do you think that, inevitably, the different ways of representing them end up meeting within the same urban space?

They do but they are communicating to different audiences. The chic purse is not gonna stick to the labour class and the actual Lucha Libre would scare the hell out of someone who is used to the West End shops.

Are we talking about different visual icons? Or is it the same icon being displaced from one context to the other?

They are like skins. Che Guevara is like wallpaper now. It has very little to do with Che and people wear the t-shirts and everything. The people who sell them do not care about Che and he would have shot them. He was a son of a bitch. I like to think of them as stereotypes that infiltrate us. Again, like osmosis. But it is exhilarating too because you see Speedy Gonzalez and think “I see a marker of myself in mass culture, shouldn’t I embrace it?” These are Mexican immigrants appropriable semiotic costumes that you can use to instantly acquire a look.

There’s perception and then there’s reality. So I like to think of these signs as rentable skins.

3.2.2. Mexican Contemporary Comics: ¿Los Perdidos?[10]

Interview conceded by Dr. Ernesto Priego on the 28th of June 2011 in London, UK.

The style, the format and the use of bilingualism in La Perdida are completely transformed throughout the novel. Why do you think this is?

It is a consequence of how the comic book was created and now people read it as a compiled volume. It was originally published in five loose numbers. So it has to do with the fact that it was initially published as separate issues and those issues were not published regularly, like on a monthly basis for example, but they were published as they were being finished.

When the first issues were published, there were lots of comments of how difficult it was to understand the bilingualism in the story. So it was decided

---

[10] Dr. Ernesto Priego, born in Mexico City and based in London, UK, has got a PhD in Information Studies (University College London) and a background in cultural studies (UEA Norwich) and English literature (UNAM). His research and work is mainly based in the areas of graphic and multimodal narrative studies, digital innovation and material culture. Priego worked as Jessica Abel’s cultural assistant in the creation of *La Perdida* and translated this novel into Spanish for Astiberri’s edition in 2006.

that from issue number 3 all of the characters would be presented speaking English and using the convention of <>.

Last year when I tried to do a presentation in Leeds on the different types of translation that exist in this comic I pointed out that there were several different levels and one of them was Jessica's communication with me. In spite of the fact that she is fluent in Spanish we used to speak in English while she was living in Mexico.

I started working in this book reviewing her English, that is to say, making sure that the expressions she used for the characters speaking in Spanish were the most appropriate for a "chilango" [Mexico city resident] and this process occurred way before I made the translation into Spanish for Astiberri's edition in Spain.

What was the editorial policy that you had to follow when you were asked to translate this novel into Spanish?

It became much more difficult when I was asked to translate this into Spanish because the editor wanted the characters from the United States to speak Spanish from Spain and the "chilango" characters to speak "chilango." I advised against this as I thought that the analogy didn't work. I do not think that you really loose anything when all of the characters speak the same language. The other day I watched Roman Polanski's film *The Tenant*, all the characters are based in Paris and the only words they use in French are "monsieur" or "madame" and the rest of it is English but as an spectator you make a suspension of disbelief and you do not really care about what language they are using.

What you are saying reminds of the following example:

Numerous comic book authors choose to stick to one language and the reader accepts this convention. I would argue that the key aspect for achieving such suspension of disbelief is to build a solid and coherent world within the comic book. This could be the case of James Sturm's novel *Market Day* (2010) written in English, it portrays the life of a Jewish artisan who sells rugs in an Eastern European market in the early 20th century. Strum asserts that the works of photographers like Roman Vishniac and Alter Kacyzne that documented European Jewish culture before the Second World War were part of his main sources of inspiration. The following page is taken from his comic book:

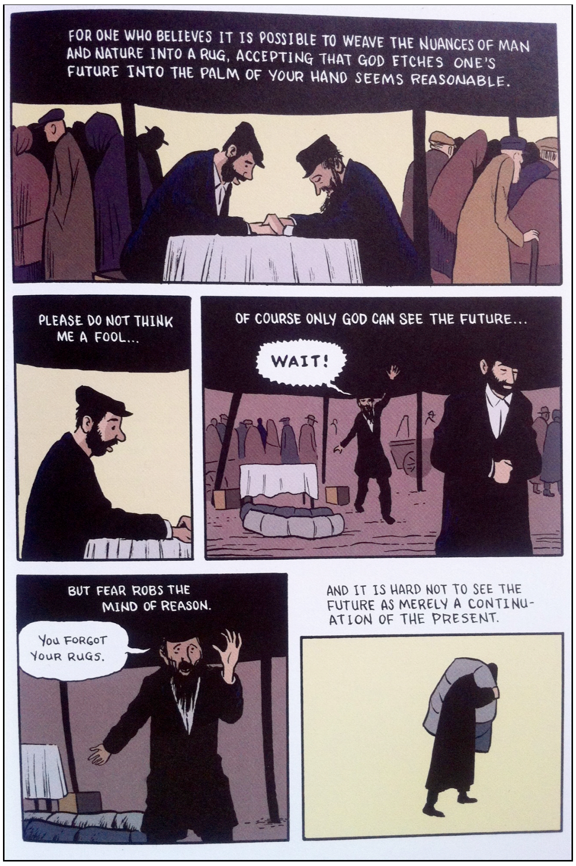


Figure 108. Sturm, James (2010) Market Day (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 12).

It is not difficult to recognize that the pictures in this page allude indeed to the works of Vishniac not only because of the depiction of a Jewish ghetto, but also because the photographer used to pose as a merchant who sold fabrics in his travels across Eastern Europe where he took thousands of pictures of children, sellers, beggars, rabbis and families. It is also not difficult to believe that these two dark haired bearded men wearing long coats belong to a European Jewish community of the early 20th Century. The concepts of labour, faith, reason and trust in God's will and the value of work in order to secure a prominent future are all part of the Jewish worldview of this character. So the English language is not an impediment but a tool used by the artist in order to express the conflict within this, without a doubt, Eastern European Jewish man.

Can you think of other examples like this *Market Day*?

Last June [2011] Marjane Satrapi gave a talk at the Barbican and she was asked why *Persepolis* — her autobiographical comics that were adapted into a film — hadn't been made in Persian, her native language, and she replied that this was a joint collaboration with French filmmakers and that she has been living in France for several years now and has even become French citizen. So when you watch the film it is not a big issue, even if you watch it in English you do understand that they are supposed to be speaking a foreign language. Is like looking at something red that reads "green." It is a fascinating visual cognitive problem.

You played a crucial role not only as Spanish language consultant for the author but also orienting and informing her on various issues related to Mexico City life and culture. Can you describe this process?

It was from the conception of the comic that we sat down and she told me what she had in mind, what the story would be like, and she asked me what situations I thought that could be addressed. There was when I came up with the idea of "Gordo" a character that is based in someone I knew in real life. The physical description of lots of the characters was based - probably, she would need to check her notes - in people I had met. In particular a street gang from Coyoacán [neighbourhood in Mexico City]. There was a level of translation between her and me while we were developing the ideas of specific situations and building up these characters.

Figure 109. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 130).

Priego also inspired the character of "Ernesto" depicted in **Figure 109.** The young man ends up saving the day when Harry is kidnapped and Carla manages to ask him for help.

So you were suggesting, explaining and building iconic characters based on your experience of everyday life in Mexico City. Once she had the story, what was the following process?

It was a process of proof-reading. The first thing she sent me via e-mail was the script and the first drafts as well as jpg files.

I personally found it very difficult to understand how readers in the United States were going to comprehend the dialogues of the characters that spoke in Spanish while being in Mexico. You have characters from the United States that speak Spanish when they are in Mexico, characters from United States that speak English while being in Mexico, characters from the United States that speak Spanish but appear to be speaking or thinking in English when they are in their home country.

I am thinking in particular in the sequence in the taco restaurant in a Mexican neighbourhood in Chicago. The complexity in this page has to do with the fact that one language is memory and the other is the present tense. So, what you mention in your writings on *Scott Pilgrim* about the permeable boundaries is present here as well.

Figure 110. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 4).

In the panels where the character of Carla is depicted with short hair and not trying to look like a Mexican she is actually in the United States but she is able to express herself in Spanish fluently, she knows what to order, how to eat a taco and where to find it within Chicago (panels 1-4), just like a person of Mexican origin would do. Then there comes a transition where the reader can infer that she is beginning to remember something (panels 5-6) opening the path for the space of nostalgic memory to appear. This is where she finds the "real" Mexico, which is, again, an operation that numerous fictional Chicano characters experience in literature. She is depicted with her long braid and hippie skirt, she is not able to understand what the taco seller is asking her so there is the need for a translation that explains her errors and the misunderstanding (panels 7-8).

Can you describe the negotiation with these permeable boundaries in the creative process of this novel?

In this sequence, for example, in a linguistic level there is no frontier between Mexico and the United States, and the same applies for past and present within the narrative.

This was one of the problematic issues. I thought that we could use the symbols <> as it is the convention in comics in order to represent that a foreign language is being used but she wanted to give it authenticity and she also wanted to oblige the readers to come up against the foreignness of the language. She might have wanted to recreate her personal experience while living in Mexico.

The most interesting aspect of it is how the material story reflects the condition of a text as such.

I have always found that there is a huge gap between the first and the last chapters in the story. The style and the narrative tempo change significantly. Would you agree with this? Why do you think this happened?

It might have been that by the end she got tired. The beginning is a bit tidier and then it turns a bit darker and more baroque. It has to do with what is happening in the story, which is actually getting uglier and uglier. But it also has to do with the fact of how long it took to create this comic: from 2001 until 2005 plus the review, correction and translation process. So these are five years of manual labour since almost everything in her style is done by hand. So when you get to page 200 is visible that her wrist aches.

Could you elaborate on her technique? Was everything done by hand?

It's her individual work, she is not working with other artists to help her with the inking, it's a manual work which is more demanding than being able to copy and paste details such as gestures, faces as many artists do today. She might have photocopied a few things but almost everything is made by hand.

Did she also work with pictures?

She didn't actually worked with photographs at all until she was back in the United States. When this happened I occasionally sent her photographs of a corner or a street in Mexico City that she might have been thinking of.

There are many moments in the narrative where the character seems very surprised with her findings in Mexico. In spite of being Frida Kahlo's greatest fan, when she is confronted by her political ideology or her patterns of behaviour towards Diego Rivera, Carla realizes that, as a 21st century woman, there are things that do not necessarily resonate with her. The following sequence is, for me, one of the clearest examples of this kind of discovery:

Figure 111. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 14).

There is the topic of Joan Borroughs. This is a very interesting fact of the cultural history of our country. Mexico is a country that evokes very marked cultural references to people, myths, icons that visitors look for. Frida Kahlo, Trostky, Diego Rivera, Siquerios or luchadores. I mean it happens everywhere but it is particularly interesting how this is so recurrent in Mexico. Or maybe I find it interesting because I am Mexican but, in any case, there are preconceived narratives. So the main character is very honest when describing the impression that the story of Joan Burroughs [Vollmer] has on her and how she dies and it is also very interesting how this is linked to Frida. It forces you as a reader to detect what these two women have in common so you do realize that the story is also about violence against women.

And by this you mean violence against women in general and not only in Mexico?

Joan was murdered by her drug-addict, crazy husband. It really had nothing to do with the fact that they were in Mexico, it could or it would have happened in San Francisco or New York. If you read any work by Burroughs violence is recurrent no matter where he was when he wrote it.

A different case is for example, Malcom Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, I do not think I understood this aspect of the novel until I lived in the UK: Mexico is almost like the Medieval Carnival where everything is permitted. And this is also visible in real life with spring breakers that head to Tijuana or the Brits that go to Cancun and they destroy the place and then go back home. So there is this idea of values being inversed, almost as in a Menippean satire, in Mexico.

Mexico is a playground for debauchery so it is therefore the ideal place for Burroughs to kill his wife or for Neal Cassidy to die as he did in San Miguel de Allende. From Trostki who arrives in the country in 1937, the myths go multiplying and juxtaposing one on top of the other. So the confusion of those stories, those narratives that you carry with you as a visitor of a place are written over reality.

A comic book related to what Priego refers to as “multiplying and juxtaposing myths” is *Un verano insolente* [An Impertinent Summer] (2010) by two artists, the Spanish Rubén Pellejero and the Belgian, Denis Lapière. They recreate the Mexican cultural scene of the 1920’s, and they address the story of the Italian photographer Tina Modotti who was close friends with Frida and Diego and, like them, she was a very active communist and member of the intellectual scene in Mexico and Europe. The authors address her controversial death, which happened inside a taxi, the official cause was declared to be a heart attack but given the fact that Trostki’s political opponents had killed him just two years before, in the case of Tina it always remained the suspicion of murder.

This comic is very well documented but it is also, in many ways, a very anachronistic story. It is narrated by an entirely fictional character, a French homosexual poet, Théo, who supposedly met all of these artists in the summer of 1923 and who travels back to Mexico in 1942. I argue that this character’s reiterated nostalgia of the past, that a contemporary reader can understand and identify completely, was not necessarily so clear back then. Even when 20 years had passed the transcendence, the value of the legacy and the importance of the artistic movements of the 1920’s were still settling in nationally and internationally and the notion of this “Golden Age of Mexican Art” was not so generalized back in the day, as it is clearly seen now. In addition, in the Spanish translation, there have been inserted colloquial expressions that maybe a, like you said before, 21st century Chilango character of *La Perdida* could have used, but not a waitress in a Mexico City cantina 60 years ago:

Figure 112. Lapière, Denis and Pellejero, Rubén (2011) *Un verano insolente* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 58).

In the sequence above, Théo is narrating his memories from 20 years before to, Miguel, a taxi driver and Melinda, the female character who works in the cantina, the entire translation is made in Iberian Spanish, nevertheless she occasionally uses distinctively Mexican expressions such as "toda esa banda" [all that gang] which, along with her behaviour, would have been more suitable for a later character, maybe one in the 1960's. The way in which the character of Théo evokes the freedom, the renaissance and the golden years seems like a much latter discourse, maybe closer to the one that these two authors would use to refer to that period as seen with the current distance of time and history.

So again there is a predisposition to mix the golden years of Mexican early 20th Century Art and other topics such as political controversy or misogyny and violence against women…

Yes, there is this anticipation, a predisposition for certain scenarios to develop which is not different in the case of the narrative of *La Perdida*. This is also the period where tv news and printed press coined the term "express kidnapping." And Jessica and Matt where part of this, they where living in this space. They were in between a privileged status, which is also permeated by harsh realities such as crime, hunger, addictions. So this is what the novel reflects. It is at the same time terrible because it almost seems as the manifest destiny, I do not think *La Perdida* was looking at the future of anything. This is a book that makes me feel uncomfortable, I am not so keen to recommend it because it worries me how this shows clearly that there is a market for this kind of narrative.

Clearly, there is a current trend in comic books to cover topics of insecurity, violence and morbid stories taking place in contemporary Mexico. That is the case of, for example, *Luchadoras* (2006) by a French author Peggy Adam who wrote a fictional story of a woman who lives in Ciudad Juarez but, just like Maureen Burdock who has also produced a comic book inspired in this city, she has never visited Mexico and it shows that she is working with pictures and replicating other successful models. The following page is a clear example of this issue:

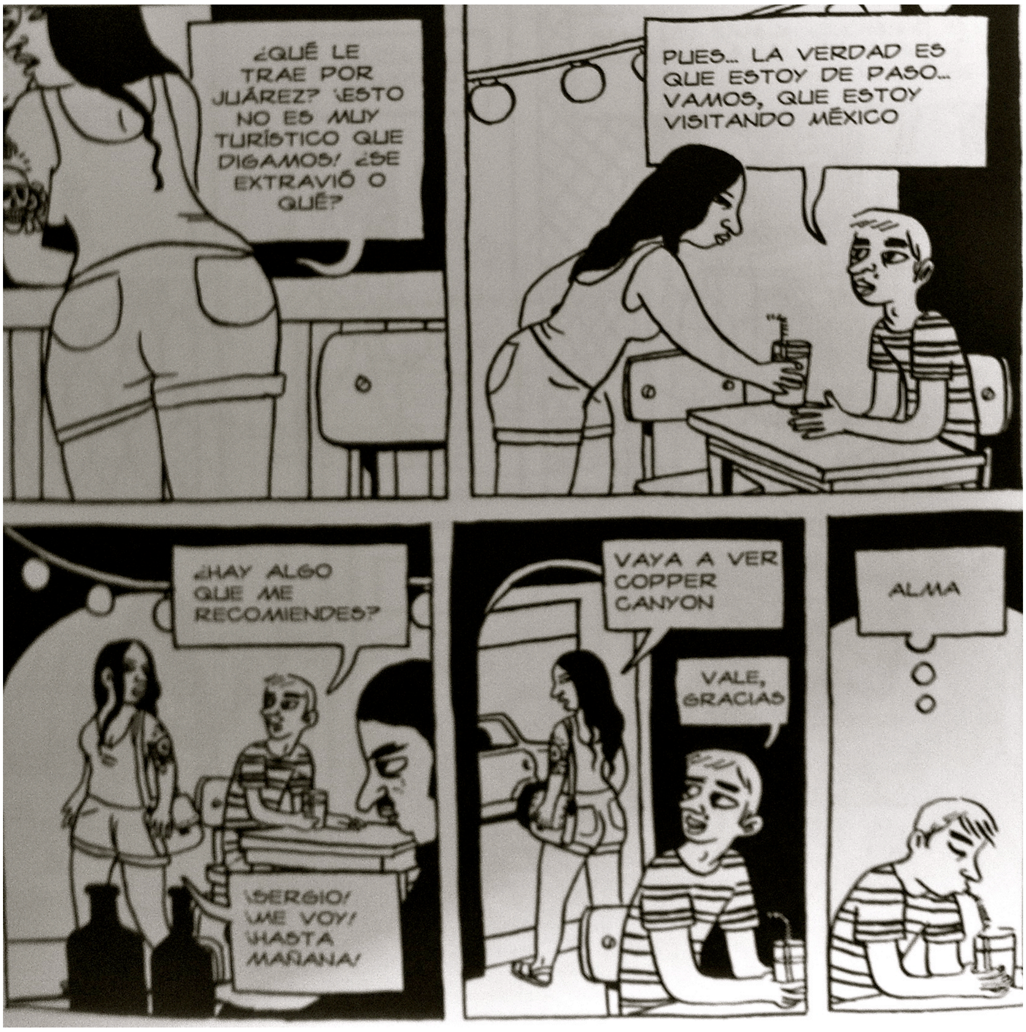


Figure 113. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido, 40).

A foreign photographer newly arrived in Ciudad Juarez is captivated by the character of Alma, a young woman that, as clearly seen above (panel 1) fits in the cliché of a sexy voluptuous Latin American woman with strong personality (panel 4) that leaves the tourist craving her as his main object of desire (panel 5).

What do you think about a book such as *Luchadoras*?

This is clearly a Satrapi. These books share the same aesthetic canon: black and white and documentary aspirations including fictional works that refer to specific places and have realistic characters instead of angels or superheroes.

Like I said, there is a gap in the market for this kind of narratives and developing countries offer this in a fantastic way because people can read these books in a safer context but feeling that they are finding out about a different reality and feel responsible for learning things that are not Walt Disney. But I do find something opportunistic.

Specially because there are not enough local voices that could act as counterparts, something that lots of plastic artists have achieved in Tijuana, for example…

If you think of several cases of African literature or Hindu literature, narrating post-colonial stories is an empowering process. Being able to tell their own story is an indispensable condition for self-determined people and for their cultural legacy. And it is very interesting that all of a sudden you do have a corpus of graphic narratives about Mexico and none of them is made by Mexicans.

Why is the Mexican comics creative scene so silent then?

When Jessica Abel was creating *La Perdida* I was way more active in the comics creative scene in Mexico and there were lots of female artists drawing and working but why there wasn't the purpose of narrating this type of story? There was Cecilia Pego talking about her cat, tons of other girls were producing manga and wanted to conquer the United States market but with certain expectations and cultural horizons that somehow skipped such topics. I am not saying that these authors were not interested at all but these topics were not part of their work. And they never thought that these would be topics that could become marketable. So what I am saying here is not a xenophobic critic but I do think that it is very revealing that they still do not exist.

It's a shame that there are not more. I read women's opinions from the Middle East who are advocated to prove that not everything in their countries is as we imagine and that not every woman suffers gender violence in their countries or not all women are thrown acids in their faces.

Do you think the medium of comics is in itself part of the impediment?

We are talking about a medium that is supposed to be accessible but in reality is so specialized and so opposed to being within easy reach that it has been cultivated in other spheres. Frontier literature and authors such as Daniel Sada have turned into best-sellers but the Mexican comics creators have not been interested in these topics. However they do explode the icons, Edgar Clément published *La Operación Bolívar* in 1995 and there are some of these problems but the perspective is different.

Figure 114. Clément, Edgar (2012) *Sentimientos de la nación* (Accessed on 5 November 2012. http://issuu.com/edgarclement/docs/sdln?mode=window&pageNumber=1)

In the contemporary scene of Mexican comic books production, Clément can be singled out for his non-conventional use of Mexican cultural icons, his re-invention of national discourses and his eclectic aesthetics. In the above panel making allusion to Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, the icon of God has been replaced by one of Mexico's most famous wrestler Blue Demon —who is, by the way, described by Abel as: "my favourite *luchador*, or wrestler. I have nottranslated his name here because it was always in English, Blue Demon, and never el *Demonio Azul*" (Abel 2006, 259)— and the angels have also been replaced by small devils evoking artisanal Mexican figures made of clay. In one word, popular icons that make a playful allusion to evil replace the classic heavenly icons associated with this painting. As for "Adam", he is not depicted as the naked human figure newly created and free of sin, quite the opposite, he is replaced by what seems to be a common man wearing jeans and sneakers.

Now that you mention Clément and *La Operación Bolívar*, I think it is a good example of the fact that Latin American fiction has this tendency to be extremely political. Do you think that within the collective consciousness something must have political elements in order to be truly Mexican?

It has to do with two things, one is a question of market, the other is the collective perception of Mexico. It is an inherited colonial attitude, a fearlessness that comes from belonging to an empowered context. Authors can talk about mostly anything and share their opinions on everything with no fear at all. In the case of Jessica she is very honest, she thanks a lot of people, she wanted to work with me because I am Mexican, she did show the acceptance that she couldn't know it all and that she was not a local.

A Mexican artist that spoke about Juarez would be now competing in the market with all of these authors and these implies distribution and dissemination systems. In addition there are also decades of falling behind being appreciated so its market would be rather reduced or it would only fit in a European or North American market so the situation is really complex.

The case of 2010 Orange Prize winner Barbara Kingslover author of the novel titled *The Lacuna* has got all of the elements: Coyoacán, Xochimilco, Teotihuacán, La Casa Azul, Frida and Diego, filled with food and smells. It is, like you mentioned, highly political, there are discussions about Trostky, Stalin, the muralists, Vasconcelos. It has got all of the ingredients for a Brit reader who is fairly acquainted with Mexico can find here everything that would wish for. This is now regarded as a Golden Age in Mexican cultural history where all of those icons were consolidated. And I regard this novel as a counterpart of *La Perdida*, it all ends with the main character having to run away from Mexico.

So they are not very different from the spring-breakers that you mentioned earlier…

They go to Mexico and publish their book and the issues remain in the country.

I agree. These are not works of journalism or testimonials with the objective to preserve a story. Nevertheless, I am thinking of *La pipa de Marcos* in particular, since it is based in the author's experience as an observer in La Realidad, he does recreate situations that inform the reader on what everyday life could be like in a EZLN community…

They try to document or to inform in a different way. *Maus* in a way informs, but it is not a journalistic novel. Whereas Joe Sacco is a war correspondent. The comics you are working with are travel books. The difference is the result. They tried to turn this into a more poetic or human narrative.

For example, a work on the Jewish holocaust, such as *Maus* would be considered as very problematic if it wasn't produced by Jewish person. Testimonials and authenticity are taken very seriously and touch cultural sensitivities.

So you would agree that the potential reader of this story is an equally important determinant factor when producing a comic book of this sort?

If you read *The Great Gatsby* you do not say "hey, wait a minute, there were poor people too" that is not what you expect from this story. On the other hand when topics like this one are addressed, there is this general expectation that they must represent the reality as a whole.

I do think that *La Perdida* could have been produced in not such a stereotypical way. I would have liked to see why these Mexican guys were the way they were and why this idiot who wished to become a DJ only had one record. The cultural differences are also contrasting, all the expats have got a job and a future and the Mexicans are lost: a Dj with no records or a pseudo-intellectual who devotes his time to complain about everything without doing anything.

Carla is also a stereotypical foreigner who cannot identify when she is in dangerous liaisons…

You and I grew up with a natural sense of untrusting others, identifying stigmas and selecting what kind of people you should relate to and what kind of people you should avoid. And when one comes from a cultural context where everyone is equal -or more-less equal- as the one that the character of Carla belongs, she kind of assumes that everyone is like this. And she had no way to compare. Her other choice were the expats that were extremely boring and not the most attractive group of people to hang out with.

In *Persepolis* when she is in Vienna I kind of thought that the story would go on that direction but in the end those young punks are educated and nice. But this is something that could have easily happen to her.

3.2.3. Illustrated History

Interview conceded by Francisco de la Mora on the 18th of December 2011 in Mexico City. [11]

As former editor and co-founder of Sexto Piso, a Mexican independent publishing house with a collection of a graphic novels and comics, including *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez*, *Diario de Oaxaca* and *Drawn to New York*, what were the criteria of promoting books in this genre and created primarily by foreigners?

I would have liked to say that the decision was taken after careful analysis of the Mexican and the international situation. But it was not. Like many other decisions in Sexto Piso, it was taken by the simple pleasure that the editors find in reading certain type of books. Characters like *Asterix* or *El Santos vs la Tetona Mendoza* by Mexican cartoonists Jis and Trino, made of fans of picture books that you know better how to call them: comics, picture books, graphic novels, etc… The name of the collection aimed to cover everything and, over the years, I think it has.

Now, we looked for books in Europe because the quality and variety of visual narratives there is huge. In addition, in Mexico they operate in two levels: novelty and "malinchismo."

I wonder if your decision to publish a collection on Illustrated Mexican History entirely made by Mexicans is an answer to the scarce scene of the Mexican comic book world?

It is actually a bit more of the same. A formula that we thought could be successful, and that allowed me to start writing scripts for graphic books. So it was my moving from editor to writer-editor.

I do not think these books fill any gaps, but I do believe that Mexico is beginning to generate illustrators, comic book writers and readers of both Mexican and foreign authors.

---

[11] Scriptwriter and publisher, Francisco de la Mora has a background in Latin American Literature (Universidad Iberoamericana). In 2002 he co-founded Editorial Sexto Piso, the Mexican editorial house that published some of the main works by Peter Kuper, Troub's and Edmond Baudoin studied in this thesis. Since 2009, De la Mora works as independent author and editor based in Mexico City.

What is the critic you make of Peter Kuper's vision of Oaxaca?

Kuper is a "gringo"[12] who has a "gringocentric" vision of the world, but he also thinks that he is a bit of the opposite. Kuper represents the "middle class" of rich countries who think that their life style does reach everyone. This I think is the biggest mistake of those who do make an effort to contribute to build a world which is a bit more fair, but wouldn't really understand their life if it was really equilibrated with the lives of others that, for different reasons, are socially or economically oppressed. This is very similar to the Mexican rich people who vote for the left and believe that by studying at UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico] and talking about politics they are not guilty of the national inequality.

That is the vision that Kuper showed us in his *Diario de Oaxaca*. It's a beautiful book, but unfortunately that's not all. Because if Kuper understood that he is a great artist and he had not tried to put their two cents on the social issues that afflicted Oaxaca during his stay in that city, the book would be nothing more than beautiful. The only thing that happened is that he had the "luck" of encountering a conflict heated enough to be international news, but equally quiet to prevent him from jeopardizing his integrity. He felt like Jon Lee Anderson in the line of fire in Iraq, and it is not the same.

Ironically, especially in Spain, the review tends to be that they read the first part of the book happily, but the second with disappointment, which is simply one in which Kuper narrates graphically what he sees in our country.

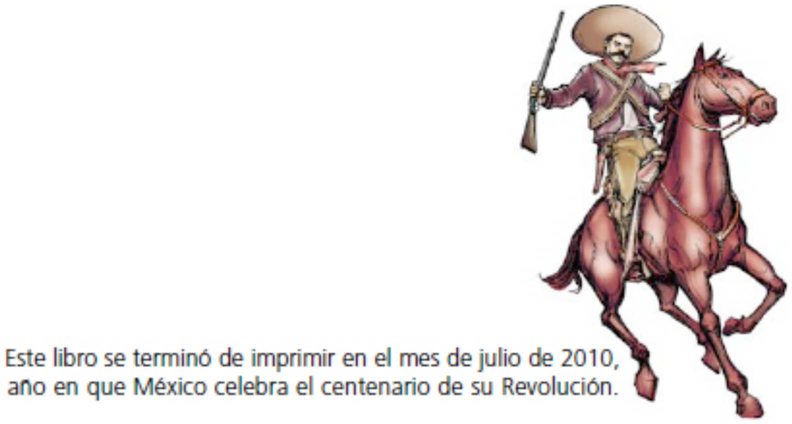
Do you have a similar perspective of *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez?*

It is a dangerous book. Because it is so dangerous to take an initiative like this one in a place like Juarez. I think that, in a very subtle way, the authors disrespect the recent history of the city.

I completely agree, and the so not recent history as well. There is an idealization that sometimes prevents them from double checking facts or including multiple political perspectives or questioning what it is being presented to them as the actual truth. They should have read your book on Mexican Revolution, they wouldn't have mistaken Zapata for Villa.

---

[12] As Jessica Abel remarks in *La Perdida*: "The Word gringo is known to most all Americans, but what most don´t realize is that it's not always used generically, as description; it can also carry a negative connotation, sort of a "you're just an American, what would you know?" attitude." (Abel 2006, 254).



Este libro se terminó de imprimir en el mes de julio de 2010,
año en que México celebra el centenario de su Revolución.

Figure 115. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia minima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 110).

The seventh volume of this collection was published on 2010, on the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution and in the same year when Mexico and some other Latin American countries, celebrated the 200th anniversary of their War of Independence.

Is there anything you do like about this book? Just like in the case of Kuper who is an extremely talented artist?

Furthermore, *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* is a book that has some very beautiful graphic details and it will never cease to amaze me when a page of a book moves me.

The series of history books in Mexico emerges from collaboration with one of the most respectable higher education institutions in the country, El Colegio de México, why was it relevant for you and the historians working in this editorial project to narrate Mexican History using the medium of comics?

This is where the easy answer comes handy: the new generations require new formats to approach history. But that is a very simple answer and it is not honest.

The reality is that projects are not important. Or rather, they are not sooo important to give them too much time or attention. I would change the question to: “Why do you think that Mexican History books using the medium of comics work?” If that's okay...

Go for it!

They work because we are curious to learn. And the medium of comics works because it is a different tool to carry that out. Also because some pages are very nice and, as in the previous answer, I am not the only one moved when a page makes some illustrator worth being seen. Picture books are liked so much because it is very easy to enjoy them. Unlike a good novel, or the same about a poem, comics are easy to see. It's a bit like the film. Go to a movie, however dense or harsh, it is simple. You might not enjoy it or not understand it, but it’s only two hours of your day. A comic book works somewhat like this as well. It is easy to see. Reading is another thing. It takes time, loneliness, stress, etc. And to distinguish a good poem or a good novel, from another which is not so good, is much more complex.

I would add that they also work because there is the possibility to juxtapose several historical and transcendental moments in just one page and, like you said, the reader gets to see but also “hear” the historical characters.

Figure 116. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia mínima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 45).

In the page above three key moments in the political life of Francisco I. Madero appear to be condensed or, as it has been explained in previous sections, simultaneously. In addition, the narrative present, where the old librarian relates the story to the young man is represented too. The contrast between the books in the shelf and the jail where Madero seats writing a letter is probably a summary of what these books intend to do: they consult the experts in order to represent the characters in a novel but still informed and accurate way.

So if, like you said, it is easy to differentiate good from bad illustration, which is a statement that I would personally disagree with, how was the process of selecting illustrators? Has this been a joint collaboration with historians?

Historians read the scripts and correct all the historical work, including both the text and the iconography. Some of them are more involved than others. So far they have not participated in any editorial decision but we have consulted them at all times.

Do you think that this series of books reinforce icons of Mexicanity or question icons embedded in the collective imagination?

The original story, which is told in the *Nueva Historia Mínima del Colegio de México*, first published in 1973 and lastly updated in 2004, is the result of many years work by a group of the most respectable researchers. El Colegio de México (Colmex) is one of the strongest institutions of this country, and the story that unfolds here gathers some of the most brilliant minds that we have in different areas of history. So I think that the icons that this collection of books question must be sought in the historical perspective that these authors present. The collection of graphic adaptations intended to be an accurate reflection of the original, so I cannot say that I have personally questioned certain icons, but I cannot say either that I have notdone it. Those who come to these books know that Colmex is behind these volumes and that's kind of what they are looking for.

Figure 117. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia mínima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 77).

I argue that there is a degree of interpretation when a selected icon is chosen in order to communicate an idea. The fact that someone chooses to represent Mexico partially covered with the United States flag while talking about Álvaro Obregón is emphasizing the transcendence of such historical decision, more than the act of deciding it.

CONCLUSIONS:

A Threshold to the Cultural Frontier

In the following pages I pinpoint a number of final remarks related to what I identify as the gateway to multiple possibilities facilitated by the method of analysis proposed in this thesis. These observations would be useful in order to carry out a formal study of cultural icons presented within comics in general and not only on those studied in this thesis. The reason why I have titled the present section "A Threshold to the Cultural Frontier" is because I consider that every comic book might have one or multiple "thresholds" but I would argue that finding one in a single panel or page is enough to expose the entire cultural frontier created throughout the book.

I also include a summary of the abovementioned multiple possibilities that the main topics addressed in this dissertation could lead to since, as it is discussed in the final section titled "Never "¿Ends?"", the interconnection and the process of transferable icons and archetypes has been historically inherited and will continue to be so. The juxtaposition of different boundaries is the nature of any type of frontier, including a cultural frontier.

Vanishing point

As I mentioned in the introductory section of this thesis the fact that icons are transferable is what makes this method of analysis flexible enough to be displaced to other cultures, fictional worlds, languages, ethnicities or geographies. This aspect has been exemplified when I mentioned the graphic documentary *Waltz with Bashir. A Lebanon War Story* or, in the section titled "Mexican Contemporary Comics: ¿Los Perdidos?," when I cite the case of the graphic novel *Market Day*. These two cases are clear examples of the fact that this type of study is mainly based on the reader's point of view and the building of a role as competent observer. Within the visited space provided by the narrative —whether this is Eastern Europe in the early 20th century, Israel in the 1980's or Mexico City in 2000— it is a must to take into account the multiplicity of boundaries intervening on it. The reader is, at one time, affecting and being affected by the comic book's narrative. This method therefore contributes to bring into surface the comics potential for multiple dynamics of transformation.

As I have shown, in my case studies, in particular, the authors are confronted with a constant need to create and reinvent themselves when noticing their foreignness within Mexico, which is something very similar to what Alÿs asserts about his own process while living in the country's capital:

> Mexico City forces you to constantly respond to its reality, it requires you to resituate your presence all the time, to reposition yourself in the face of this inacceptable urban entity. That is exactly what I see happening in my neighbourhood every day, with all these people who keep inventing themselves –the people who one day feel the need to construct a personality, an identity, to find their place in the urban chaos. For example, there is this man in his forties who you can see surveying the Zócalo by cleaning the gaps between the flagstones of the pavement with a wire bent into a hook at one end and a circle as handle at the other. It's his way to be there, to justify his being there. That is the role he plays on the urban chessboard. It is this kind of people who often provide the inspiration for what I do, the pretext — at once cruel and poetic — for a series of works. (Alÿs 2006, 120).

This is not just the case of finding one's own role but also of being able to distinguish what is the actual "chessboard" of the narrative. In some cases, it might prove difficult to identify what the different icons are, cultures or discourses intervening in this dynamism. In such cases I would propose a functional way to carry out this type of research, which begins by identifying a "threshold" to the cultural frontier. Such threshold is the vanishing point, the point where all the lines of perspective converge. A comic book might have one or multiple thresholds but I would argue that finding one in a single panel or page is enough to discover the entire cultural frontier created in the whole book.

In order to demonstrate the function of such threshold, in the following pages I make reference to the main authors studied in this research and the fact that they all have included depictions of their own — or their character's — entrance into the cultural frontier where the core of their comics is unleashed. The examples cited below, that I refer to as the 'cultural frontier threshold', illustrate a phenomenon which is very similar to what was demonstrated in the section titled "Mexican Cultural Icons," in the example taken from the book cover of Abel's *La Perdida*.

My first example of 'cultural frontier threshold' is taken from *La pipa de Marcos*. Here, the main character, Vasco, is trying to cross the security control in the State of Chiapas in order to visit the Zapatist community of La Realidad:

Figure 118. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 10).

From the very beginning, De Isusi makes it clear that, in spite of the very serious political situation illustrated in his comic, there is also a playful side to it. The character of Vasco pretends not to know a thing about the community he is intending to visit; he goes by as a naïf tourist pretending to visit a nearby lagoon. The security officer prevents him from causing any trouble and from getting involved with the local 'terrorists' (panel 4). I argue that what De Isusi is illustrating here is how the official authority in this area of the country turns blurry. In spite of his stars and credentials, the tourist calls the general "my sergeant" (panel 5) but he corrects Vasco by saying he is in fact a general calling attention to the stars in his uniform (panel 6). Vasco rectifies his error calling him affectionately “mi cielo” [my heaven] and doing so he goes away entering into a new region, where he is not supposed to go — or so the (mocked) authority says — but where he knows he will be very much welcomed as it is discussed in the section called ‘Exploring “La Realidad.”’

The second example is the illustration made for the Mexican version of the *Diario de Oaxaca*’s cover:

Figure 119. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso).

Figure 119 presents a big tank that has a surveying video camera on top, a protective net on its front window and a metal A-shaped structure at its front, the purpose of which is to push people away and destroy barricades. On the corner there is a tree on a side walk where someone has written “Fuera U…”, which refers to the protest message written everywhere in the walls of the city: “Fuera Ulises Ruíz” [‘Ulises Ruíz Out!’ makes reference to the governor of the State of Oaxaca]. At the back it can be seen a bricked colonial building as well as a pedestrian and another tree. Everything has red and green notes of colour with the exception of the tank, which is drawn in metallic gray and looks like being ready to sweep the red coloured figure of a pedestrian walking right in front of it while carrying a basket on her head and reading what appears to be a magazine. So, from the very first impression, the cover of his book, Kuper is inviting the reader to enter in the town he has just arrived in: a town where a disproportionate repression on behalf of the authority comes to surface. This is juxtaposed with a colonial landscape where pedestrians, many of them wearing local clothing, express their political opposition.

As for the case of Abel's *La Perdida*, the book cover discussed in the first pages of this thesis is not the only iconic composition that depicts a foreigner emphasizing her "foreigness." During the first weeks, Carla, the main character, devotes her time to visit the capital's most important attractions, such as Teotihuacan, Xochimilco and the city centre:

Figure 120. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

As the text box points out in **Figure 120** Carla had been a tourist during her first few weeks in Mexico avoiding to think about her return to the United States until she finds out that she has missed her flight back home. This is the turning point in which Carla enters into a new zone; blindfolded by her romance with Mexico —and a Mexican—, Carla starts overlooking boundaries that are still relevant and present, such as her tourist visa, which will soon expire and bring legal consequences such as not allowing her to visit Mexico never again.

In *Life Sucks*, Dave's first day as a vampire, inserted below, is shown as the protagonist experiences the following series of events recounted by his housemate:

Figure 120 Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 75).

The fact that this is a story being narrated within the main story and not something taking place in the present of the narrative is shown by the thick black and fuzzy edges of the grid. Dave is finding out that his favourite cereal is now completely flavourless (panel 2) and his housemate has become, in one way or another, his potential source of nourishing (panel 3). Dave acknowledges his disbelief, he is now obliged to hunt for food and he will need to abandon his most quotidian and unmovable habits. And he needs help and support from someone while he is still getting used to his new form of existence: being a vampire (panel 4).

A third example is offered by Baudoin and Troub's. Their aim is to visit the northern frontier where hundreds of murders, mostly directed to women, have been occurring since the early 1990's. They begin by asking themselves what is this place that they are going to visit:

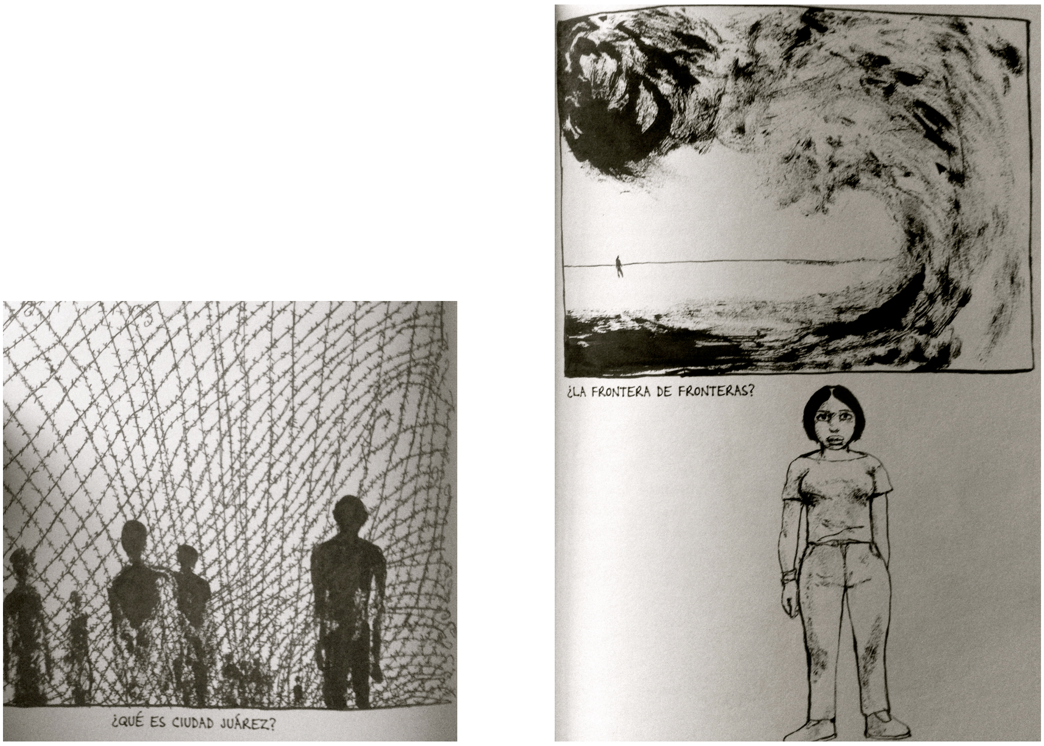


Figure 121. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 15-16).

After depicting zombie-like figures rising behind a wired spiky fence and asking the question "What is Ciudad Juarez?" in this page a giant wave of sand rises in front of a tiny human figure. A Mexican young woman, casually dressed in jeans, trainers and t-shirt, seems to be the answer to the question, "Is it the frontier of frontiers?" So, Baudoin and Troub's enter in this way into a hunted space, permeated by suggestions of horrific visions that trap innocent people, like the woman illustrated here.

In summary, all of these narratives offer a point, a vanishing point, in which they enter into ambiguous zones where a new order of things, different authorities and forms of human organization, is to be discovered and, if possible, understood. I argue that all of the permeable boundaries present in these books are to be found in each one of the examples provided below. This is why Parker's model is so useful in order to pinpoint the overlapping boundaries with an extremely high charge of political content and criticism on behalf of each one of these authors. In addition, Nericcio's notion of osmosis is equally useful in order to demonstrate the many ways in which these intervening boundaries are permeable.

Once the cultural frontier has been identified and the threshold into it has been crossed it is necessary to respond the question of where this is leading to. I argue that there is no definite destination. In the next section I will make a final comment on the never-ending path implied in reaching a cultural frontier.

Never "¿Ends?"

As it was demonstrated in the previous section, the multiple cultural frontiers created in these comics and pinpointed all throughout this study have not originated only thanks to the Mexico-United States relationship and are only symptomatic of a natural process of cultural interchange involving a multiplicity of worldviews, socio-political issues and external factors, which take place in every human multicultural interaction. It is a recurrent and historically traceable aspect in culture. As Nericcio asserts:

> The idea of "Latinos are unclean" resembles the British when they complain about the Spanish, they still complain when they go on vacation to Ibiza or something. The kind of jokes that you see in a British pub are parallel to those of an anti-Mexican Arizona gringo racist. That is what's fascinating: these archetypes are transferable. They translate. The introduction of my book is about this translation and the common denominator is national conflict so I talk about stereotypes being like bloodstains in the way that you can't get rid of them but also because usually people make fun of other people because they've been in war with them. So the United States was in war with Mexico, Spain and England have a long history of blood too. (Nericcio 2011, n.p.).

As it is described in the quote above, the interconnection and the process of transferable archetypes has been historically inherited and will continue to be so. Conflicts translate and surpass the barriers of time, language and history. Kuper's continuous use of collages built on simultaneity of past and current events is one of the clearest examples quoted in this thesis. In the following fragment, Kuper is not only evoking the eternal search for peace but also the end of his journey in Oaxaca as represented by the picture of a highway and the vertical graphics alluding to artisanal works:

Figure 123. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 193).

In the above detail taken from a montage of *Diario de Oaxaca* there is a postal stamp with the portrait of Benito Juarez, a former Mexican President born in 1806 in a small town in the State of Oaxaca. Juarez is one of the country's most important historical figures, he restored the Mexican Republic overthrowing the Second Mexican Empire and resisting the French invasion. He became Mexico's President for the first time in 1858 — he got re-elected twice — and most of his efforts were destined to modernize the country eradicating the privileges of the clerical class. One of his best-known quotes is: "Respect for the rights of others is peace." As a political cartoonist and a tough critic of governments, Kuper's allusion to Juarez in the midst of the current challenges of both Oaxaca and the United States seems to be very pertinent along with the question "¿Nunca acaba?" It is significant to note that his inclusion of handwriting in English makes use of an icon in Spanish by asking: "¿ends?". The question mark "¿" has been displaced from the realm of Spanish to the English language; this illustrates how the experience of Oaxaca is irreversibly attached to his new perception of the world, which has been permeated by the influence of his immersion in this culture.

The work of Kuper has, in equal measure, been highly influential for other authors among which is, for example, Junot Díaz, the Dominican writer, who affirms that: "Kuper is a colossus. I have been in awe of him for over 20 years." (Kuper 2009).[13] Each one of the chapters in this thesis is dedicated to build a critical approach to the analysis of ambiguous or unstable concepts of national and cultural identity within contemporary comics. And all of the comics analyzed in this thesis as the main corpus of study are following a trend initiated decades ago. As Paul Gravett asserts:

> Since the late 1970s, successive generations of graphic novelists have been exploring the human condition in comics with perceptive insights and intriguing symbolism. Looking back for inspiration from the past, Los Bros Hernandez, Chris Ware, Seth, Eddie Campbell, and several others were drawn to America's robust legacy of "the funnies," especially the urban, socially real serials from the 1920s and 1930s. The daily struggle became a perfect subject for the daily

---

[13] Diaz is the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondorous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) a work that could be taken as one endless cultural frontier because of the many ways in which Dominican Republic cultural icons are deconstructed and reviewed. Díaz' work is not written in a comic book format but, the main character, Oscar is constantly evoking comic book characters and narratives and these are permeating the narrative all throughout the book.

> strip (…) Their working girls and flappers, conmen, gamblers, and newlyweds, Gumps, Nebss, Bungles, and other eccentric households suggested that all of us could be the heroes or our lives." (Gravett 2005, 39).

So, as it has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, the authors studied in this thesis enlarge the already present group of international comic book writers and illustrators who have produced works based on their interest on both, ordinary characters in general and Mexican contemporary life and culture in particular. Therefore, these authors are not only influenced by their own direct experiences in Mexico but also by a series of other factors that have inserted certain Mexican cultural icons within the collective consciousness and are somewhat expected to appear on a comic addressing Mexican issues. The most remarkable case studied in this thesis is that of the highly influential Mexican-American authors, the Hernandez Brothers, that have created legendary "Mexican" comic book characters and "Mexican" communities which, as it has been pointed out, are permeated by Anglo-Saxon popular culture — including punk rock as it is the case in *Locas* — and Latin American Magical Realism — as clearly seen in *Palomar*.

In addition, it has also been demonstrated that marketing campaigns and international trade have contributed to determine what is visually accepted as the canon or the official Mexicanity, as it is the case of a properly labelled tequila bottle making an appearance in a comic book produced by a Canadian author, as seen in O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*. Furthermore, historically inherited icons that link Mexico to Latin America are continuously found in the comics analyzed here, as it was seen in multiple references to words or iconic sequences culturally meaningful such as "chiquita", "burro" or "revolución."

It was also established that the cultural industry and the international press have also inserted world wide re-known and appealing Mexican Cultural Icons such as luchadores, Frida Kahlo, or even Sub-Comandante Marcos whose balaclava keeps captivating the attention of numerous international illustrators and photographers; on the other hand, icons of aversion such as drug cartels, organized crime, gender violence, illegal migration and marginal indigenous population are also naturally displaced as icons of Mexicanity.

As all of the factors abovementioned illustrate, the first chapter of this thesis is key in order to show that, in the study of cultural frontiers within comics, it is compulsory to de-construct the influential iconicity that inevitably drives the authors both conscious and unconsciously. This study demonstrates the importance of analyzing the ways in which such concepts of Mexicanity are visually articulated in comics.

Once the analysis of iconic deconstruction has been made it is possible to expose the level of competence that each one of these authors has as reader of the reality represented in their comic books. This is what the second chapter has been about: demonstrating the authors' awareness of their own use of iconic displacement.

For instance, it was clearly shown that Javier De Isusi had not only lived for an extended period in the State of Chiapas but also that he had experienced the sensation of being one of the local foreigners trying to understand the paradoxical space of "La Realidad", and his strategy to represent the dynamics of this double-faced reality is by displacing Marcos' balaclava to a multiplicity of faces: from other foreign characters, to the most local ones such as the young man called Solín. This way, Vasco, the main character fully realizes the aim of Marco's masked face, which is to represent the unrepresented. Even if only for a few panels, Vasco, with his masked face, becomes the vindication of the unrepresented.

In terms of competence, *La Perdida* is also a good example that shows the author's appropriation of the space of Mexico City that she inhabited for a couple years. The social events, the allusions to the local press, the visit to the newspaper *Reforma*'s office and the artistic exhibitions that the characters attend or the expressions used by the local "Chilango" residents demonstrate that the author was living in the city during those years. But they also show that there was an active collaboration by a Mexican author advising where to find certain type of characters. Priego's intervention in the creative process is in fact a form of iconic displacement in itself. Borrowing a marketing term, the work of localization within this novel is extremely competent but, for the same reason, it contrasts notoriously with Abel's foreign narrative voice. However, as Priego asserts, Abel's honesty to admit that she is not able to decode Mexico City's reality as a local is what allowed her to produce a much more ambitious work that stands out within contemporary comic books addressing similar topics such as the cases of *Un verano insolente* or *Luchadoras* that have been reviewed in this thesis.

In contrast, in the case of *Life Sucks*, the voices of the authors are equally identifiable and, I argue, work together more tunefully. As it has been shown, Gabriel Soria's knowledge of Los Angeles and popular culture is clearly identifiable in some of the main character's dialogues, just like the parallelism between Warren Pleece's aesthetic exploration of identity in the black and white novel *Incognegro* and his work in this vampiresque multi-ethnic and multi-cultural fictional L.A. Jessica Abel's exploration of the topic of Mexicanity is also an easily identifiable feature of this polyphonic novel. From the conception of the novel, the joint collaboration of these authors is another form of conscious iconic displacement: there is a linear narrative, as opposed to other narratives such as *La Perdida* that were initially created as a series, *Life Sucks* shows that it was created as one volume from the very beginning and that editorial policy is always consistent and visible in a number of elements such as language conventions, characters' development and uniform aesthetic style.

In the case of *Diario de Oaxaca*, as it has been stated, Kuper's work is based on simultaneity. The author consciously juxtaposes New York's cultural icons and Oaxacan cultural icons and he also puts together icons of past and present emphasizing their contrasts. His extended stay in this Mexican city enabled him to narrate a critical series of events — related to an old and still present socio-political conflict — from beginning to end. Kuper and Abel's observation of Mexico are very similar in the sense that they are both aware of being local foreigners, they might not always seem to be conscious of their pre-conceptions but their works acknowledge a visible degree of self-criticism. This is particularly remarkable in Kuper's resolutions when preparing to go back to New York and in Carla's, *La Perdida* main character, last words about her final days in Mexico. In both cases there is an awareness of their transition from local foreigners to locals at their place of origin. There is a multi-level narrative.

In comparison, as I have argued in the last sections of Chapter 2, Baudoin and Troub's are not authors who seem to experience major transformations. They set out a goal that needed to be completed in a reduced period of time and they landed and departed Mexico embodying the figure of the "superchild" without experiencing noticeable changes by their submersion into Mexican culture.

Having stated the importance of de-constructing Mexican cultural icons and identifying the dynamics of iconic displacement, it is equally important to observe the key factors intervening in the creative process of such comic books. Editing and translation issues, for instance, increase the possibilities of iconic displacement within these books. The fact that there is a number of scholars devoted to study topics such as Mexican comics and its semiotic costumes and history shows the increasing academic interest and relevance of this type of research.

In summary, the cultural frontier is not a final destination but an infinite highway and it is ideal to understand it as a continually bifurcating journey. The authors are permeable boundaries and I, as a researcher and as a Mexican, am a permeable boundary as well. And so is the reader. Therefore, the present study has been dedicated to demonstrate how unclear boundaries are. This thesis has never got as one of its aims to illustrate objectivity, quite the opposite; it is about the subjective interconnection of the multiple boundaries taking place in the creative process of comics that make use of icons located within the author's visual imaginary.

Summary

In all of the comics analyzed in the present research there are a number of juxtaposed contrasting systems: from different world visions, to code-switching from English to Spanish and vice-versa, from fiction and coming of age stories to authors witnessing real life mobilizations and socio-political conflicts.

Therefore, the subject of this thesis has been to focus on the subjective interconnection of the multiple boundaries taking place in the creative process of comics that make use of icons located within the authors' visual imaginary.

As it is demonstrated in the second and third chapters of this research, the authors studied in this thesis enlarge the already present group of international comic book writers and illustrators who have produced works based on their interest on both, ordinary characters in general and Mexican contemporary life and culture in particular. This thesis also reveals many different ways in which the authors are confronted with a constant need to create and reinvent themselves when noticing their foreignness within Mexico, which is something very similar to what the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs asserts about his own process while living in the country's capital.

The second chapter shows a number of cases in which the authors' awareness of their own use of iconic displacement is evident. In addition, cases of iconic replacement, where authors make an unconscious use of this situation are also demonstrated.

The third chapter focuses on the context in which the works, authors and artistic movements operate. This part of the thesis demonstrates that such factors increase the possibilities of iconic displacement within these books including aspects related to the creative process of comics as well as editing and translation issues. It also shows testimonials of further permeable

boundaries intervening in the creation and dissemination of comics such as the relationship between the authors and the editors, these books' readership and their niche in the popular culture scene in and outside of Mexico.

Equally important is that part of this thesis also contributes to demonstrate that the multiple cultural frontiers created in these comics and pinpointed all throughout this study have not originated only thanks to the Mexico-United States relationship and are only symptomatic of a natural process of cultural interchange involving a multiplicity of worldviews, socio-political issues and external factors, which take place in every human multicultural interaction. In this way, the thesis also makes evident how unclear boundaries are.

Finally, the method of analysis applied in this case study builds a critical approach to the study of ambiguous or unstable concepts of national and cultural identity within contemporary comics. In this way, it contributes to show how visual literacy gives shape and provides a language to the unstable world of leaky realities that we live in.

Works Cited

24HORAS. 2012. “Miles protestan contra “imposición” de Peña.” http://www.24-horas.mx/miles-protestan-contra-imposicion-de-pena/ Accessed on 23 July 2012.

Abel, Jessica. 2006. *La Perdida.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren. 2008. *Life Sucks*. New York: First Second.

Abirached, Zeina. 2012. *A Game for Swallows*: *To Die, to Leave, to Return.* New York: Graphic Universe.

Adam, Peggy. 2007. *Luchadoras.* Translated by Lucía Bermúdez Carballo. Madrid: Sins Entido.

Alcaraz, Lalo. 2011. “Happy Birthday To The Mas Badass Mexican Artist Ever: DIEGO RIVERA”. Accessed on 31 October 2012.

http://laloalcaraz.com/happy-birthday-to-the-mas-badass-mexican-artist-ever-diego-rivera/chilinfrida-diego

Álvarez Béjar, Alejandro. 2006. “Mexico's 2006 Elections: The Rise of Populism and the End of Neoliberalism?” In *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.

Ang, Ien. 2006. “From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research. Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-first Century”. *Cultural Studies Review.* Vol. 12, No.2: 183-197.

Appleyard, S.J. 1991. Becoming a Reader. The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Apostolidès, Jean-Marie. 2007. “Hergé and the Myth of the Superchild”. *Yale French Studies* No. 111: 45-57

Arnheim, Rudolf. 1954. *Art and Visual Perception.* 12th ed. Berkeley: University of California.

Bakhtin, Mijail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Iswolsky, H., Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Baudoin, Edmond. 2011. Personal interview on 20 May.

Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc. 2011. *Viva la Vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez.* Mexico: Sexto Piso.

Burdock, Maureen. 2010. *Marta and the Missing.* Santa Fe: Narrative Arts Center Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

————. 2003. "No, it's not anti-semitic." in *London Review of Books*. Vol. 25, Issue 16. 21 August.

Carroll, Lewis. 1992. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

Clément, Edgar. 2012. Sentimientos de la nación. Accessed on 5 November 2012. http://issuu.com/edgarclement/docs/sdln?mode=window&pageNumber=1

De Isusi, Javier. 2004. *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra.* Bilbao: Astiberri.

————. 2004. "Entrevista a Javier De Isusi". *Entre Comics*. Accessed 9 June 2012. http://www.entrecomics.com/?p=6130

Durán de Huerta, Marta and Nicholas Higgins. 1999. "An Interview with Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, Spokesperson and Military Commander of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)" *International Affairs.* Vol. 75, Issue 2: 269-279.

Eisner, Will. 1985. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative.* 10th ed. New Jersey: Poorhouse Press.

Fo, Dario. 1988. *Mistero Buffo*. Translated by Stuart Hood and Ed Emery. London: Methuen Drama.

Folman, Ari, Polonsky, David. 2009. *Waltz with Bashir. A Lebanon War Story.* London: Atlantic Books.

Fox, Claire. 1994. "The Portable Border: Site-Specificity, Art, and the U. S.-Mexico Frontier." *Social Text*, No. 41, Issue 2: 61-82.

Galeano, Eduardo. 2003. *Las venas abiertas de América Latina.* Madrid: Siglo XXI.

————. 2012. *Los hijos de los días.* Madrid: Siglo XXI.

García Canclini, Néstor. 1995. "Mexico: cultural globalization in a disintegrating city." *American Ethnologist*. Vol. 22, Issue 4: 743-755.

Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos. 2010. *Nueva historia minima de México. La Revolución*. Mexico City: Turner.

Goff, Patricia. 2000. “Invisible Borders: Economic Liberalization and National Identity” in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, Issue 4: 533-562.

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. 2001. “The New Global Culture: Somewhere between Corporate Multiculturalism and the Mainstream Bizarre (A Border Perspective)” *TDR*, Vol. 45, Issue 1: 7-30.

González Echevarría, Roberto. 1993. “Archival Fictions: García Márquez’s Bolívar File” in *Critical Theory, Cultural Politics and Latin American Narratives*. Paris: University of Notre Dame Press.

Gravett, Paul. 2005. *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*. New York: Harper Collins.

Guevara Escobar, Arturo. 2009. “Revolución. Cambio e imagen.” Accessed 4 May 2012. http://fotografosdelarevolucion.blogspot.co.uk/

Hernandez, Gilbert. 1991. “Frida” in *Love and Rockets Vol. 1*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.

———. 2003. *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.

History Ireland. 2008.“Che Guevara, Jim Fitzpatrick and the making of an Icon”. *Ireland and Latin America. History Ireland,* Vol. 16, Issue 4: 52-53

James Sarah and Sibley David. 1991. Children's Geographies: Some Problems of Representation in Area Coverage, Vol. 45, Issue 1: 268-270.

JIS. 2004. *Cats Do not Exist*. Seattle: Fantagraphics.

Johnson, Matt and Pleece, Warren. 2008. *Incognegro*. New York: Vertigo.

Kumar, Krishan. 2000. *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kuper, Peter. 2008. *Diario de Oaxaca.* Mexico: Sexto Piso.

———. 2010. “Alicia en el País de las Maravillas.”Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971

———. 2012. “Drawn to New York.” Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048

———. 2011. Personal interview on 10 October.

Lambiek. 2012. Accessed on 5 June 2012. http://lambiek.net/artists/b/baudion.htm

Lapière, Denis and Pellejero, Rubén. 2011. *Un verano insolente*. Bilbao: Astiberri.

Larrain Jorge. 2000. *Identity and Modernity in Latin America.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Los Angeles Times. 2009. Accessed 23 October 2011.*Los Angeles Times*, [online] Available at: http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/pico-union/

Lotman, Iuri. 1985. *Semiosphere*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Luévano, Rafael. 2008. “A Living Call: The Theological Challenge of the Juárez-Chihuahua Femicides” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Massey, Doreen. 2012. in Phillips, Andrea. The Residualization of the Social. http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/6847/3/AAAII%20Interview%20Phillips%20Massey.pdf Accessed June 8, 2013.

Marcos. 1997. “Marcos is gay.” Accessed in 9 May 2012. http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/16118

McCloud, Scott. 1994. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art.* New York: Harper Collins.

———. 2000. *Reinventing Comics.* New York: Harper Collins.

MacDonald, Victoria-Maria. “Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or "Other"?: Deconstructing the Relationship between Historians and Hispanic-American Educational History”. *History of Education Quarterly*. Vol. 41, Issue 3: 365-413.

Merino, Ana. 2009. “The cultural dimensions of the Hispanic world seen through its graphic novels”. *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. New York: MLA.

Meskin, Aaron. 2007. “Defining Comics?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 65, Issue 4: 369-379.

Messieh, N. 2001. *The Next Web.* Accessed on 6 May 2012. http://thenextweb.com/uk/2011/10/16/julian—assange—shows—up—at—occupy—london—wearing—an—anonymous—mask

Monsiváis, Carlos. 1989. “Notas sobre el Estado, la cultura nacional y las culturas populares en México”. *Cuadernos Políticos,* Issue 30*:* 33-52*.*

————. 1999. In: Thelen, David “Mexico’s Cultural Landscapes: A Conversation with Carlos Monsiváis” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, Issue 2: 613-622.

————. 2005. *Imágenes de la tradición viva*. México: FCE/Landucci.

Moore, Alan. 1988. In: Kavanagh, Barry. “The Alan Moore Interview” *Strange Things Are Happening*. Vol. 1, Issue 2: 12-15.

————. 2011. In: Lamont, Tom.“Alan Moore— meet the man behind the protest mask.” *Guardian*. Accessed on 3 May 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/27/alan-moore-v-vendetta-mask-protest

Moore, Alan, Lloyd David. 2005. *V for Vendetta.* London: Titan Books Ltd.

More, Thomas. 1808. In Cayley, Arthur. *Memoirs of Sir Thomas More Vol II*. London: Cadell and Davis.

Nericcio, William. 2007. *Tex{t}-Mex*. Austin: Universtiy of Texas Press.

————. 2011. Personal interview on 9 June.

Nodelman, Perry. 1990. *Words About Pictures*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press.

O’Malley, Bryan Lee. 2010. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe*. London: Fourth Estate Ltd.

Paasi, Anssi. 1990. “The Rise and Fall of Finnish Geopolitics”. *Political Geography Quaterly*, Vol. 71, Issue 1.

Parker, B. 2006. “Toward and Understanding of Borderland Processes”. *American Antiquity*, Vol. 71, Issue 1. Society for American Archaeology. pp. 77-99.

Pleece, Warren. 2008. *Incognegro*. New York: DC Comics.

————. 2008. In: Jensen, Van. “Warren Pleece on Life Sucks and Incognegro.” *Comic Book Resources.* Accessed 4 October 2011. http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=12824

Portilla, Miguel León. 1980. *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality.* Mahwah: Paulist Press.

Priego, Ernesto. 2011. "El silencio del cómic mexicano." Accessed 3 April 2012. http://sinlugar2010.wordpress.com/2011/08/03/el-silencio-delcomic/

————. 2011. Personal Interview on 28 June.

Ratha, D., S. Mohapatra and A. Silwai. 2010. 'Outlook for Remittance Flows 2010-11: Remittance Flows to Developing Countries Remained Resilient in 2009, Expected to Recover During 2010-11', Migration and Development Brief 12, Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Rayner, E.H. 1992. *Human Development*. George Allen & Unwin, London.

Rosen, Elizabeth. 2009. "The Narrative Intersection of Image and Text: Teaching Panel Frames in Comics" in *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Rudin, Ernst in Reutter, Cheli. 1996. *Tender Accents of Sound: Spanish in the Chicano Novel in English.* Santa Fe: Bilingual Review Press.

Ruiz, Olivia. 2006. "The Mexican Presidency, 2006-2012: Neoliberalism, Social Movements, and Electoral Politics" *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 33, Issue 2: 46-55.

Sacco, Joe. 2001. *Palestine.* Seattle: Fantagraphics.

Satrapi, Marjane. 2003. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Schumacher E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful*. 20th ed. London: Vintage.

Soria, Gabe. 2008. "Booknotes Gabe Soria ("Life Sucks"). Accessed 17 June 2011. **http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2008/06/book_notes_gabe.html**

————. 2010. "Down but not out: Treme, New Orleans." *Guardian*. Accessed 30 September 2011. http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2010/apr/10/treme-david-si mon-new-orleans?INTCMP=SRCH

Stanislavsky, C. 1936. An Actor Prepares. 1983. Translated by Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Art Books.

Stoker, Bram. 1993. *Dracula*. London: Wordsworth.

Sturm, James. 2010. Market Day. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

Tabachnick, Stephen E. 2009. “Introduction.” *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. New York: MLA.

Troub’s. 2003. *Walkatju*. Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet.

————. 2006. *Troub’s en Chine*. Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet.

United States Census Bureau. 2011. “State and County Quick Facts.” Accessed 24 October 2011. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_RHI105210.htm

Villa, Raúl Homero. 2000. *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. McCloud, Scott (1994) *Understandig Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 26).

Figure 2. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 206).

Fiure 3. Commission for Environmental Cooperation of North America (2012) Logo (Accessed on 12 July 2012. www.cec.org).

Figure 4. Kuper, Peter (2012) “Drawn to New York.” (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

Figure 5. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, n.p.).

Figure 6. O’Malley, Bryan Lee (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 57).

Figure 7. Parker, B (2006) “Toward and Understanding of Borderland Processes”. *American Antiquity* (Vol. 71, Issue 1. Society for American Archaeology, 90).

Figure 8. O’Malley, Bryan Lee. (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 55).

Figure 9. O’Malley, Bryan Lee. (2010) *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 56).

Figure 10. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 7).

Figure 11. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 157).

Figure 12. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 11).

Figure 13. Zazzle (2012) “Burro” (Accessed on 3 July 2012. www.zazzle.com/burro).

Figure 14. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

Figure 15. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 105).

Figure 16. Morris, Gary (1996) “Carmen Miranda: *Bananas Is My Business*” (Accessed on 13 June 2012. http://brightlightsfilm.com/16/carmen.php).

Figure 17. Chiquita (2011) “Miss Chiquita” (Accessed on 9 May 2012 http://www.chiquita.com/Our-Company/The-Chiquita-Story/Miss-Chiquita.aspx).

Figure 18. Chiquita (2011) “Miss Chiquita” (Accessed on 9 May 2012 http://www.chiquita.com/Our-Company/The-Chiquita-Story/Miss-Chiquita.aspx).

Figure 19. Grupo Modelo (2011) “Victoria” (Accessed on 13 June 2012 http://www.gmodelo.mx/victoria.jsp).

Figure 20. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 45).

Figure 21. Guevara Escobar, Arturo (2009) “Revolución. Cambio e imagen.” (Accessed 4 May 2012 http://fotografosdelarevolucion.blogspot.co.uk/).

Figure 22. El País (2007) “El Che antes del Che” (Accessed 4 May 2012 http://elpais.com/elpais/2007/10/09/actualidad/1191917828_850215.html).

Figure 23. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 18).

Figure 24. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 137).

Figure 25. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 29).

Figure 26. McCloud, Scott (1994) *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 11) .

Figure 27. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 190).

Figure 28. Fo, Dario (1988) *Mistero Buffo* (Translated by Stuart Hood and Ed Emery. London: Methuen Drama, 27).

Figure 29. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 77).

Figure 30. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 8).

Figure 31. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 1).

Figure 32. Hernandez, Gilbert (1991) "Frida" in *Love and Rockets Vol. 1* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 13).

Figure 33. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 115).

Figure 34. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 74).

Figure 35. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 96).

Figure 36. Hernandez, Gilbert (2003) *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 24).

Figure 37. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks*. (New York: First Second, 118).

Figure 38. Geographical distribution of the Mexican regions represented in the main comic books analyzed in this research.

Figure 39. JIS (2004) *Cats Do not Exist* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 76).

Figure 40. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 104).

Figure 41. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 90).

Figure 42. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 121).

Figure 43. Moore, Alan, Lloyd David (2005) *V for Vendetta* (London: Titan Books Ltd).

Figure 44. 24HORAS (2012) "Miles protestan contra "imposición" de Peña." (Accessed 23 July 2012 http://www.24-horas.mx/miles-protestan-contra-imposicion-de-pena/).

79).

Figure 78. Kuper, Peter (2010) “Alicia en el País de las Maravillas.”(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

Figure 79. Kuper, Peter (2010) “Alicia en el País de las Maravillas.”(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

Figure 80. Kuper, Peter (2010) “Alicia en el País de las Maravillas.”(Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=9971).

Figure 81. Kuper, Peter (2012) “Drawn to New York.” (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

Figure 82. Kuper, Peter (2012) “Drawn to New York.” (Accessed on 12 June 2012. http://drawger.com/peterkuper/?article_id=13048).

Figure 83. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 12).

Figure 84. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 37).

Figure 85. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 133).

Figure 86. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 46).

Figure 87. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 40).

Figure 88. Sacco, Joe (2001) *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 45).

Figure 89. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 118).

Figure 90. Troub’s (2006) *Troub’s en Chine* (Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet,15).

Figure 91. Troub’s (2003) *Walkatju* (Chatenay Malabry: Editions Alain Beaulet, 13).

Figure 92. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub’s, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*. *Los*

sueños en Ciudad Juárez (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 99).

Figure 93. Escritores por Ciudad Juárez (2011) "Escritores por Ciudad Juárez" (Accessed 22 December 2011. http://escritoresporciudadjuarez.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/escritores-por-ciudad-juarez.html).

Figure 94. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 119).

Figure 95. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 122).

Figure 96. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 36).

Figure 97. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida. Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 123).

Figure 98. Satrapi, Marjane (2003) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 5).

Figure 99. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido, 38).

Figure 100. Abirached, Zeina (2012) *A Game for Swallows: To Die, to Leave, to Return* (New York: Graphic Universe, 28).

Figure 101. Satrapi, Marjane (2003) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books).

Figure 102. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido).

Figure 103. Abirached, Zeina (2012) *A Game for Swallows: To Die, to Leave, to Return* (New York: Graphic Universe).

Figure 104. Folman, Ari, Polonsky, David (2009) *Waltz with Bashir. A Lebanon War Story.* (London: Atlantic Books, 63).

Figure 105. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 138-139).

Figure 106. Alcaraz, Lalo. 2011. "Happy Birthday To The Mas Badass Mexican Artist Ever: DIEGO RIVERA". Accessed on 31 October 2012.

http://laloalcaraz.com/happy-birthday-to-the-mas-badass-mexican-artist-ever-diego-rivera/chilinfrida-diego

Figure 107. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 101).

Figure 108. Sturm, James (2010) Market Day (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 12).

Figure 109. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 130).

Figure 110. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 4).

Figure 111. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 14).

Figure 112. Lapière, Denis and Pellejero, Rubén (2011) *Un verano insolente* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 58).

Figure 113. Adam, Peggy (2007) *Luchadoras* (Madrid: Sins Entido, 40).

Figure 114. Clément, Edgar (2012) *Sentimientos de la nación* (Accessed on 5 November 2012. http://issuu.com/edgarclement/docs/sdln?mode=window&pageNumber=1)

Figure 115. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia mínima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 110).

Figure 116. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia mínima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 45).

Figure 117. Garcíadiego, Javier, Cárdenas Torres, Jos (2010) *Nueva historia mínima de México. La Revolución* (Mexico City: Turner, 77).

Figure 118. De Isusi, Javier (2004) *La pipa de Marcos. Los viajes de Juan sin tierra* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 10).

Figure 119. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso).

Figure 120. Abel, Jessica (2006) *La Perdida* (New York: Pantheon Books, 28).

Figure 121. Abel, Jessica, Soria, Gabe and Pleece, Warren (2008) *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second, 75).

Figure 122. Baudoin, Edmond, Troub's, Jean Marc (2011) *Viva la vida*.

Los sueños en Ciudad Juárez (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 15-16).

Figure 123. Kuper, Peter (2008) *Diario de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Sexto Piso, 193).

Fair Academic Use

All third-party images cited in this research are shared under Educational Fair Use.

The present research is legitimate academic work.

The material used is directly relevant to the topic. Furthermore, it is essential to the topic. Since I deal with a visual art form, I need to show what I am studying.

The sources used are always cited with complete bibliographical information, including authors' and publishers' names, where known and available.

This publication is a non-profit educational resource.

The amount of copyrighted material used is not excessive, complete works are not shared and it never affects, in any way, the market value of the original.

All references to characters and comic art presented on this thesis are ©, ® or ™ of their respective owners. No challenge to any owner's rights is intended or should be inferred.